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FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2009

Established 1950, No. 18312

700 Won ★★ City Edition

Seoul's Medical Referral Service for Foreigners Underutilized

By Ines Min
Contributing Writer

The prospect of visiting a hospital is typically accompanied by anxiety and confusion over where to go, whom to see and whether or not the ailment is something to worry about.

But in Seoul, people fraught with worry can call the Medical Referral Service (MRS), a free telephone hotline available 24-hours a day.

The English-language service is a bastion of medical information available to answer general medical queries and offer counseling. The only catch is that the service is difficult to use if you've never heard of it before.

The expat-run commodity has provided advice and insider information on the ins and outs of medical facilities since 1976, but in a poll of foreigners living in Seoul for nine months to six years, each respondent showed surprise at its mention.

"I've never heard of it," said Tom Hicken, a Canadian English teacher. "And I like to think I know what's going on in the foreign community."

When Hicken first arrived here three years ago, he said he often turned to friends or co-workers for suggestions on where to go for medical treatment. He said it would have been helpful to have known about the MRS.

Of the 1.1 million foreigners living in Korea, roughly 279,000 of them lived in Seoul as of last year, according to Seoul City.

In 2008, 774 people called the MRS. For the first nine months of this year, 556 calls were received, which is an increase of two to three calls weekly.

"I think that it's important that our service is well marketed and we work with the Seoul Global Center to find creative and successful ways to do that," said the MRS coordinator, wishing to remain anonymous.

Currently, the service is listed on Seoul City's Web site and is working on creating a Facebook page.

Its staff of medically-trained volunteers equipped with cell phones are available 24-hours a day. At any given time, two of the eight staff members can be contacted at 010-4769-8218 or 010-8750-8212.

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PIFF Kicks Off: Hundreds of thousands of people watch fireworks at the opening of the 14th Pusan (Busan) International Film Festival (PIFF) at Haeundae Beach in Busan, Thursday. The international event will run for nine days through Oct. 16, featuring 355 films from 70 countries. Established in 1996, the festival has become one of the most influential film fests in Asia. Korea Times

Stem Cell Feud Goes to Constitutional Court

By Kim Tong-hyung
Staff Reporter

Stem cells are once again creating excitement here, with the government finally ending its mourning period over disgraced gene scientist Hwang Woo-suk and lifting the research ban on new stem cell lines.

However, the decision has also revived a disquieting controversy over the use of cloning techniques and the destruction of embryos, a debate that has now reached the halls of the Constitutional Court.

The court hosted a public hearing over the issue Thursday, following a constitutional complaint filed over the resumption of stem cell research.

The odd group of plaintiffs included doctors, philosophers, university professors, students and a couple in Seoul who even signed for an extracted embryo they are keeping.

Aside from arguing whether embryos should be granted, the same legal rights as persons, the participants in the court hearing

also debated whether it would be right to use embryos left from artificial insemination for research purposes.

"Embryos are the fundamental source of new beings and personalities, and their dignity and value should be rightfully respected," the plaintiffs said in a statement submitted prior to the hearing.

"There is no reason or fundamental logic to treat embryos differently based on their state, whether or not they are expecting implantation within the human body or being kept outside of it for possible use for artificial insemination."

The opponents of stem cell research claim that embryos should be considered human beings with full human rights.

They also point out a growing view in the science world that the benefits of research cloning would perhaps never meet its enormous expectations.

Predictably, government agencies, such as the Ministry for Health, Welfare and Family Affairs and the Ministry of Jus-

tice, balk at the suggestions, questioning the logic of granting the same legal status to persons and embryos in a fridge.

The policymakers, who are pledging full support for local research, insist that granting an embryo the legal status of a person could only be based on the premise that it will eventually grow into one. This doesn't count the unused embryos in the labs that may or may not be used for creating a pregnancy in the future.

"The human embryo should be respected as a potential human being, but should not be regarded with the same legal status as real persons," said a representative of the National Bioethics Committee during the hearing.

"So embryos must not be given the same constitutional rights as persons. The research using human embryos should be permitted under strict conditions if it can bring advancements in stem cell research that will lead to benefits in developing more effective medical treatments."

The National Bioethics Committee lifted the country's three-year ban on stem cell research in April when it allowed the Seoul-based Cha Medical Center to conduct research on embryonic stem cells to develop treatments for complex medical conditions.

In July, the government announced that it will triple its state funding for embryonic stem cell research over the next five years, from 40.2 billion won this year to 120 billion won (about \$103 million) in 2015.

The Lee Myung-bak administration is concerned that research has faltered too much since the landmark works of former Seoul National University (SNU) scientist Hwang on cloned human stem cells turned out to be fraudulent in 2005.

Researchers, such as those from the Cha Medical Center, claim that research on cloned human stem cells remains relevant in the efforts to create more effective treatments for difficult diseases.

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E. Asian Nations Seek Common History Textbook

By Na Jeong-ju
Staff Reporter

Cheong Wa Dae welcomed Thursday the Japanese foreign minister's proposal for South Korea, China and Japan to write a common history textbook, but said it won't be easy and could take a long time.

"It is a good idea to make a textbook based on a common recognition of the past histories of the three East Asian countries," a presidential spokesman said. "However, it will be a long-term and painstaking project."

The reaction came one day after Minister Katsuya Okada said it would be "ideal" for the three nations to come together for the project.

"Ideally in the future, we need to have a common history textbook," Okada was quoted as saying by the Sankei Shimbun during a lecture at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan.

"As a first step toward the publication of the textbook, the three countries are to implement a joint study of history."

This is the first time that Japan has officially mentioned the need to publish a common history textbook.

South Korean officials said it showed Japan's willingness to address disputes with Korea and

China over Tokyo's alleged distortion of history and to seek future-oriented relations in East Asia.

The textbook issue is likely to be on the agenda when the leaders of the three countries meet in Beijing, Saturday.

Japan's Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama will visit Seoul today for a bilateral summit with President Lee on his way to Beijing.

Japanese history textbooks have been a major source of diplomatic rows in East Asia.

Early this year, the Japanese government approved history textbooks for junior high schools, authored by nationalistic scholars, which justify Japan's colonial rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945 and glosses over its invasion of other nations during WWII.

Minister Okada also said he backs a 1995 statement by then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, which states Japan inflicted tremendous damage and suffering on Asian and other countries through its colonial rule and aggression.

"But, in the past, some ministers made remarks that run counter to the spirit of the Murayama pledge," Okada said, adding he will make efforts to ensure there will be no such remarks in the future from government officials.

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Seoul Mulls Sending Troops to Afghanistan

By Kim Jae-kyoung
Staff Reporter

The government is considering dispatching troops to Afghanistan to guard Korean citizens sent there to rebuild the war-torn country, defense sources said Thursday.

They said the Ministry of National Defense has mapped out a plan to dispatch 300 soldiers to the country where around 30 Koreans are working to provide medical and other non-military services. The government plans to increase the number of the reconstruction team to 85 by early next year.

The move comes as concerns are growing over the protection of

Korean citizens there. Currently, since there are no Korean combat troops in Afghanistan, they are escorted entirely by U.S. soldiers, according to the defense ministry.

"The government has reviewed a couple of options to protect Korean citizens, including dispatching troops and employing an Afghanistan security agency, but a final decision has yet to be made," an official said.

The ministry has come up with detailed plans and is now in talks with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The sources said the government will make a final decision after discussing the issue at a cabinet meeting.

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German Author Wins Nobel Literature Prize

STOCKHOLM (AP) — Herta Mueller, a member of Romania's ethnic German minority who was persecuted for her critical depictions of life behind the Iron Curtain, won the 2009 Nobel Prize in literature Thursday in an award seen as a nod to the 20th anniversary of communism's collapse.

Mueller, born in Romania's Transylvania Banat region, was honored for work that "with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the landscape of the dispossessed," the Swedish Academy said.

"I am very surprised and still can not believe it," Mueller said



Herta Mueller

in a statement released by her publisher in Germany. "I can't say anything more at the

moment."

The decision was expected to keep alive the controversy surrounding the academy's pattern of awarding the prize to European writers.

"If you are European (it is) easier to relate to European literature," Peter Englund, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, told The Associated Press. "It's the result of psychological bias that we really try to be aware of. It's not the result of any program."

Mueller, 56, made her debut in 1982 with a collection of short stories titled "Niederungen," or "Nadirs," depicting the

harshness of life in a small, German-speaking village in Romania. It was promptly censored by the communist government.

In 1984 an uncensored version was smuggled to Germany, where it was published and devoured by readers. That work was followed by "Oppressive Tango" in Romania but she was eventually prohibited from publishing inside her country for her criticism of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's rule and its feared secret police, the Securitate.

"The Romanian national press was very critical of these works while, outside of Roma-

nia, the German press received them very positively," the Academy said.

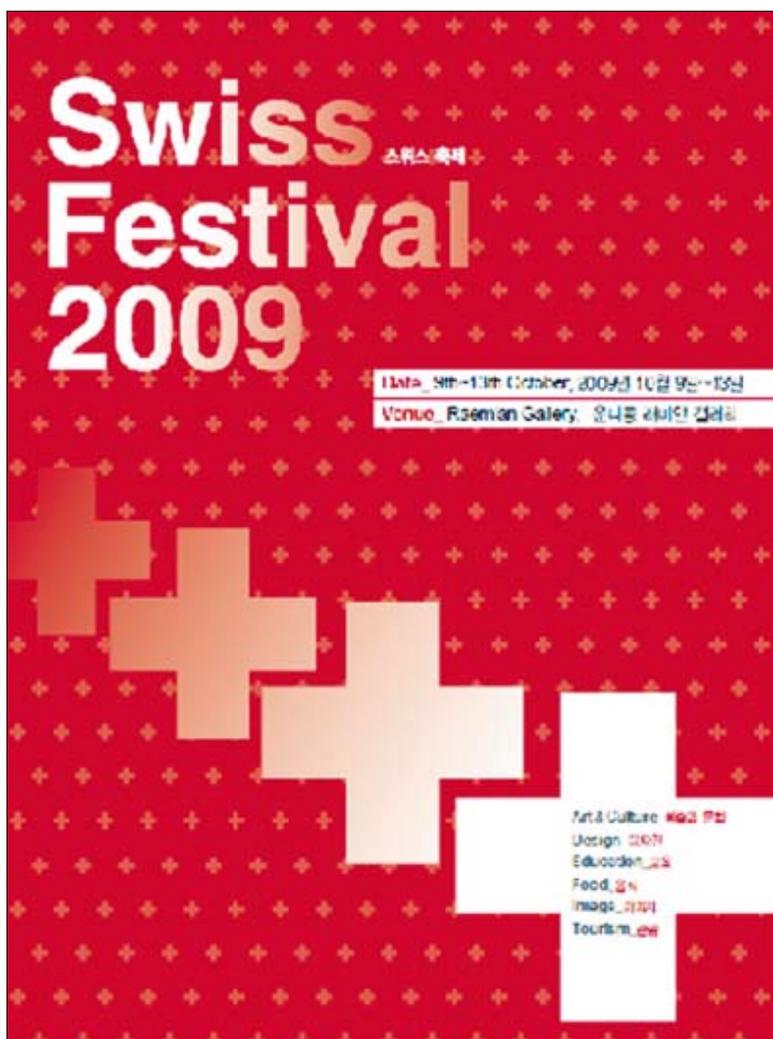
Mueller, whose father served in the Waffen SS during World War II, is the third European to win the prize in a row and the 10th German, joining Guenter Grass in 1999 and Heinrich Boell in 1972.

"I think that there is an incredible force in what she writes, she has a very, very unique style," Englund said. "You read half the page and you know at once that it's Herta Mueller."

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Swiss Festival to Hit Korea



Poster of the Swiss Festival 2009

The Swiss Embassy in Korea will hold the Swiss Festival 2009 at the Raemian Gallery in Unni-dong, Jongno-gu, Seoul, from today to Oct. 13.

The purpose of the open-door festival is to share with the Korean public some aspects of Swiss culture through special events including concerts, exhibitions, food tasting, special events for children and information stands.

All events organized at the gallery are free of charge but reservations are needed to join the concerts and workshops.

The festival will be inaugurated today by Doris Leuthard, vice president of the Swiss Confederation and federal councillor.

The opening ceremony will take place at the gallery at 6 p.m.

During the festival, the Swiss Embassy and 10 of the most prominent Swiss companies in Korea will launch the Swiss Cultural Fund. They are ABB, Gudel, Nestle, Novartis, Roche, Rolex, Schindler, SGS, Syngenta, UBS Hana Asset Management and Zuellig Pharma.

The festival intends to be diversified and promote intercultural exchanges. Therefore, most of the events presented include a cultural exchange component.

Program

The opening concert by the Huh trio features three Korean sisters. Group leader Huh Seung-yeun lives in Switzerland where she is the deputy director of the Zurich Music Conservatory.

The Swiss group Piano Duo and Tenor on their Asia tour is making a stop at the festival to perform classical and fusion music as well as Swiss folk songs.

Two concerts featuring traditional Swiss yodelling music will take place. Talented Korean yodel groups will give a performance.

Concerts featuring duos of Swiss-Korean musicians playing improvisation jazz will be held. They include Korean pianist Kae Soo-jung and Swiss trombone player Samuel Blaser.

The second classic concert features Swiss flutist Philipp Jundt and Swiss-Korean pianist Catherine Rechsteiner.

The well-known Korean photographer Lee Kyu-yeol will take visitors on a journey through the beauty of Swiss nature with "Tourism Switzerland." The photo exhibition, titled Get Natural the Swiss Way, will be held at the gallery until Oct. 13.

Children will be given the

rare occasion to try Swiss yodel during two singing workshops given by a Korean yodler Bang. These special events will take place on Saturday and Sunday at 11 a.m.

Another important exhibition linked to the Swiss festival will be held from today through Oct. 29 at the Olympic Stadium in Jamsil, southern Seoul.

Swiss architect Andreas Vogler and Italian architect Arturo Vittori will hold an exhibition "Architecture and Vision — From Pyramids to Spacecraft" which allies the notions of architecture, research, design and technology, and apply them in space and on earth with their main focus placed on maximizing energy efficiency and preserving the environment with the use of innovative green technologies.

The excellence of Swiss education is a key factor of the economic success of Switzerland which has been the cradle of Nobel Prize laureates and famous researchers throughout the years.

Visitors to the festival interested in studying abroad will have the opportunity to meet with Swiss Learning, an association representing a broad spectrum of Swiss learning institutions.