

Emerging Trends and Future Prospects of Medical Tourism in India

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Abstract

Medical tourism is a rapidly-growing practice of travelling across international borders to obtain health care. It encompasses primarily and predominantly biomedical procedures, combined with travel and tourism. The term medical tourism has been coined by travel agencies and the mass media to describe the rapidly growing practice of travelling across international borders to obtain hi-tech medical care. The key competitive advantages of India in medical tourism stem from the following: low cost advantage, strong reputation in the advanced healthcare segment and the diversity of tourist destinations available in the country. Medical tourism or health care tourism is fast growing multibillion-dollar industry around the world. It is an economic activity that entails trade in services and represents the mixing of two of the largest world industries: medicine and tourism. The paper identifies the strengths of India's medical tourism service providers and points at a number of problems that may reduce the growth opportunity of this industry. This paper focuses on the key issues and opportunities possessed by Indian medical tourism sector that enable it to overcome domestic and international barriers on upgrading its medical services. Finally, this paper analyses and concludes the main reasons why the developing country like India attracts foreign tourists for the medical treatment. It is a basket of services to patient-tourists who want their medical treatments done in foreign countries. Medical tourism can be defined as provision of 'cost effective' personal health care/private medical care in association with the tourism industry for patients needing surgical healthcare and other forms of dedicated & specialized treatment. **Keyword: medical tourism, hospital, healthcare, travel**

I. INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Organization defines tourists as people who "travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited". Tourism has become a popular global leisure activity. Medical tourism, alternatively called health tourism and wellness tourism, is a term that has risen from the rapid growth of an industry where people from all around the world are travelling to other countries to obtain medical, dental, and surgical care while at the same time touring, vacationing, and fully experiencing the attractions of the countries that they are visiting. More recently the phrase "Global Healthcare" has emerged, and may replace the earlier terms. Such services typically include elective procedures as well as complex specialized surgeries such as joint replacement, cardiac surgery, dental surgery, and cosmetic surgeries. The provider and customer use informal channels of communication connection-contract, with less regulatory or legal oversight to assure quality and less formal recourse to reimbursement or redress. The domestic medical industry in India is trying all out to grab its pie from the evolving global health bazaar.

II. ORIGIN OF MEDICAL TOURISM

The concept of medical tourism is not a new one. The first recorded instance of medical tourism dates back thousands of years to when Greek pilgrims travelled from all over the Mediterranean to the small territory in the Saronic Gulf called Epidauria. This territory was the sanctuary of the healing god Asclepius. Epidauria became the original travel

destination for medical tourism. Our Indian system of medicine like Ayurveda and Unani system of medicine for the same cause were very famous and peoples from different countries come for their treatment and healings. In Roman Britain, patients took the waters at a shrine at Bath, a practice that continued for 2,000 years. From the 18th century wealthy Europeans travelled to spas from Germany to the Nile. At first, mere travelling was considered to be a good therapy for mental and physical well-being. Spa towns and sanatoriums may be considered an early form of medical tourism. In eighteenth century England, for example, patients visited spas because they were places with supposedly health-giving mineral waters, treating diseases from gout to liver disorders and bronchitis. In the 21st century, relatively low-cost jet travel has taken the industry beyond the wealthy and desperate. Later, mostly wealthy people began travelling to tourist destinations like the Swiss lakes, the Alps and special tuberculosis sanatoriums, where professional and often specialized medical care was offered. In this century, however, medical tourism expanded to a much larger scale. Thailand, followed by India, Puerto-Rico, Argentina, Cuba and others quickly became the most popular destinations for medical tourists. Complicated surgeries and dental works, kidney dialysis, organ transplantation and sex changes, topped the list of the most popular procedures. People from many advanced countries, including the United States and Europe, see a benefit in travelling to developing third world countries, like India, Thailand, Philippines, South Africa, and etc. while combining medical treatments with inexpensive vacation. This trend is now known as medical tourism.

III. MEDICAL TOURISM

Medical tourism (also called medical travel or health tourism) is a term initially coined by travel agencies and the mass media to describe the rapidly-growing practice of travelling to another country to obtain health care. According to Mary Tabacchi, Health Tourism is any kind of travel to make yourself or a member of your family healthier. More recently the phrase "Global Healthcare" has emerged, and may replace the earlier terms. Such services typically include elective procedures as well as complex specialized surgeries such as joint replacement (knee/hip), cardiac surgery, dental surgery, and cosmetic surgeries. The provider and customer use informal channels of communication-connection-contract, with less regulatory or legal oversight to assure quality and less formal recourse to reimbursement or redress, if needed. Leisure aspects typically associated with travel and tourism may be included on such medical travel trips. The Apollo Hospitals, Escorts Hospital, Fortis Hospitals, Breach Candy, Hinduja, Mumbai's Asian Heart Institute, Arvind Eye Hospitals, Manipal Hospitals, Mallya Hospital, Shankara Nethralaya etc. AIIMS, a public -sector hospital is also in the fray. In terms of locations – Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai cater to the maximum number of health tourists and are fast emerging as medical tourism hubs. It also visualizes high-end healthcare services through Indian BPO firms like Hinduja TMT, Apollo Heart Street, Comat Technologies, Datamatics and Lapiz that work in the areas of claim adjudication, billing and coding, transcriptions and form processing. One-stop centres in key international markets to facilitate patient flow and stream lining immigration for healthcare are envisaged. The CII, along with Indian Health Care Federation (IHCF), wants to establish an Indian healthcare brand synonymous with safety trust and excellence. Therefore, it is clear that the opportunities and challenges for growth in the health sector are seen primarily within the private/corporate sector, not in the public sector. Nowadays medical tourism in India includes advanced and life savings health care services like open transplants, cardio vascular surgery, eye treatment, knee/hip different cosmetic surgeries.

IV. NEED FOR MEDICAL TOURISM

There are several reasons for the increase in medical travel. First, the demographics of the developed nations are causing a significant increase in demand for health care. In Japan, the United States of America, the United Kingdom and many other European nations, the proportion of the population older than 60 years, in relation to the total population, is increasing rapidly. Similar trends are being seen in many countries across the world. At the same time, life expectancy in most countries has also increased steadily over the years; the combined result is significant strain on national healthcare systems. The inability of many health-care systems deal with the increase in demand does, in many cases, lead to compromised levels of service and decreased access through long waiting lists and high costs. This drives many individuals to seek alternatives to domestic health care.

V. FUTURE OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN INDIA:

The primary reasons as to why medical tourism would flourish in India include much more lower medical costs for various ailments such as bone narrow transparent, bypass surgery, knee surgery and liver transplant as compared to western countries. As a result of higher and very expensive medical costs in Western countries, patients from economies of scale and even blocs like Africa, Gulf and various Asian countries have started exploring medical treatment in hospitals located in various well-to do places in India. This is because its' medical infrastructure has geared up to provide them non-subsidized medical treatment at much lower costs, adds Mr. Jindal. The other reasons as to why, India would emerge as a lead hub for excellent medical treatment is because of its strength of highly qualified medical professionals and even equally higher qualities of availability of nurses. India has over 7, 5 lakh qualified doctors and numbers of qualified nursing graduates and diploma holders are equally good and of high professional calibre who are content and satisfied with reasonable professional fees. The economic recession has had a significant negative effect on the medical tourism industry. The total number of U.S. patients who went abroad seeking medical care declined from 750,000 in 2007 to 540,000 in 2008. An increase of transportation costs may be another factor contributing to the decline in U.S. patients travelling for care and rate at which foreigners are travelling to the U.S for medical care. Recently, the weakening dollar probably causes many U.S. patients to reconsider plans to travel abroad for medical care. For example, in 2005 a patient who has been considering cosmetic surgery in Thailand received a price quote of 110,000 baht, equal to \$2,683 at that time (12/14/2005 exchange rate = 41.005 baht per dollar). If patients decided to delay having surgery for two years, she was shocked to realize that her procedure would cost \$3, 625 in 2007 (12/14/2007 exchange rate = 30.349 baht per dollar). Although the surgery provider has not increased the price, the patient has to pay almost one thousand dollars more than two years prior because of the exchange rate fluctuation (Horowitz, 2008). The prospective impact of the recent U.S healthcare legislation has to be also evaluated. Some analysts believe that the objective of providing healthcare at "lower costs" has not been addressed. According to some, the legislation not only doesn't lower costs, but has a huge chance to significantly increase the already high cost for healthcare in America. Thus, healthcare costs will continue to rise and continue to become even more unaffordable than before. This would present a huge opportunity for medical tourism, and the passing of this legislation could lead to even greater adoption of medical tourism as one of the only ways to reduce healthcare costs. It is advisable to collaborate with all relevant stakeholders to offer more value to the consumers. Mutual co-existence and collaborative opportunities will attract consumers to Indian healthcare tourism. The essence behind co-existence and collaboration is not just about making a value offering but also to create the right environment for driving consumer traffic in Indian healthcare tourism industry. A successful business model

for healthcare tourism needs to identify all relevant stakeholders and make them a part of the value chain. It is relevant to set all the stakeholders together in-order to increase the size of the market rather than each stakeholder carving out a market share for itself.

VI. ADVANTAGES OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN INDIA

Medical tourism is one of the quickest and largest growing industries in the world. As the number of uninsured people and those with high deductibles continue to go up, many of them opt to be treated outside their native land, where they can manage to pay for the treatments they need in a timely fashion. Medical Tourism in India offers low cost, or cost effective, medical treatments with no waiting lists and accessibility of skilled and experienced doctors so medical tourists around the globe are flocking like never before. Now day's expectation is that Medical Tourism will continue to grow up at a rapid rate of speed and continue offering medical treatments to tourist at a fraction of the cost they can get it at home for. India is considered among the best in international medical tourism destinations. Patients get excellent healthcare services in India. Many foreign nationals worry about the quality of facilities and care they will receive out of the country. There are many well qualified doctors and hospitals in India. Medical procedures often cost half as much (or less) in India as compared to the U.S. Even including the cost of travel and a hotel stay, it can be cheaper to have procedures done out of the motherland than to have them done at home. Low cost treatment does not necessarily mean lower healthcare standards. A wide range of exceptional medical treatment packages are offered in India at a very reasonable price. All the hospitals in India offer advanced medical technologies & health care facilities by using the same medical knowledge and technology at a substantially low price. Doctors in India are well trained and experienced, multi-lingual, with quite a lot of them having undergone professional training in US, you can be assured that you are in the most capable of hands. Ayurveda is mostly practiced in Southern India as a traditional form of alternative treatment which includes the use of natural herbs as medicines.

VII. MEDICAL TOURISM IN INDIA

Medical tourism is increasing day by day and one can see a large number of people are opting for medical tourism in India. This tourism, widely also known as medical travel, health tourism or global healthcare tourism that covers all types of medical disease and health conditions, and it also provides affordable healthcare to one and all around the globe. Health tourism helps in combining physical wellness with leisure and relaxation in order to get a completely rejuvenated experience after the entire process. Citizens of countries like Great Britain and Canada, who have national health care schemes, often undertake overseas travel to cut down on extra waiting time. Similarly, others might head abroad to get a cosmetic surgery done since it is not covered by most insurance providers. Nevertheless, since recent past, a number of couples are opting for fertility treatments outside their native countries mainly because of

steep treatment costs in their own countries and also due to the lack of appropriate monetary aid offered by their respective governments' e.g. Research involving human embryos. People also travel abroad for more complicated surgeries like cardiology treatments, hip resurfacing, cosmetic surgery, cancer treatments and high end surgeries. With ever-increasing treatments and services, varying from the simplest to the most complicated ones, availability of good low-cost medical treatment packages can also be a major factor in selecting a destination for retiring abroad. Medical tourism offers advantages to two industries-healthcare industry and tourism industry. India has gained the status of being a popular tourist destination because of an array of magnificent palaces, hill towns, beaches and much more. Medical tourism has been gaining a lot of momentum in India from a past few years. Now people on holidays avail rejuvenating ayurveda vacations along with availing medical treatments of various kinds, matching with world standards.

VIII. WORLD-CLASS HEALTHCARE FACILITIES IN INDIA

The main advantage of Medical Tourism in India is high quality healthcare standards, with low treatment cost. Secondly you get opportunity to travel, get better and quicker treatment results than in their home country. All the hospitals in India offer world-class facilities that can be compared with the other hospitals in the world. In fact, Indian hospitals and their state-of-the-art facilities are comparable with the UK or US. Indian doctors are known across the world especially in the areas of cosmetic surgery, heart bypass surgery, dental care, coronary bypass and traditional alternative care such as ayurveda. The most common surgical procedure amongst international tourists in India is renal transplantation or liver transplantation. All the leading hospitals in India offers quality services and makes use of advanced latest technology packages that offers excellent medical services coupled with specialized care. These hospitals use similar technology just like other western countries that are delivered by competent specialists attaining similar success rates. It is expected that medical tourism industry in India will experience an annual growth of 30% & will reach \$2 billion mark by 2015. Mediconnect India provides medical travel assistance, high quality affordable medical treatments with international quality standards, latest advanced medical technologies & price estimates from top hospitals in India.

IX. CONCLUSION

Medical tourism is becoming a new and emerging international business that is gradually increasing in importance. In capitalising on the tourism infrastructure that supports this industry, nations do not need to invest much more in supporting medical tourism. The rapid developments in medical tourism demands have left the policing and legislation behind. It would be imperative for this legislation to catch up in order to protect the vulnerable that are unable to make well informed research-based decisions. Tax incentives to the service providers, import duty reduction on medical equipment, committees to promote and foster medical tourism are some of the

initiatives that can be undertaken. There is also a need to develop supporting infrastructure such as transport services to facilitate tourism in India. The tourism, health, information and communication departments need to work in tandem for efficient patient care. This paper has recommended some of the medical tourism strategies for further promoting medical tourism in India. These include building and promoting the image of India as high quality medical tourism destination, creating and promoting new combination of medical tourism products, keeping up the high standard of quality treatments at a reasonable price, providing informative online and offline materials and make them available to the potential customers. The biggest challenge is to position India as a favourable healthcare destination by setting high health standards for ourselves, and work in association with the government and the medical council to see to it that all hospitals keep up to those standards. Now, the Indian healthcare federation is working along with different industry chambers to promote medical tourism in the country. Finally, we have to work towards getting accreditation for various hospitals to build up perception of quality among foreign tourists.

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