

'SCOPE AND FUTURE OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN INDIA'



Commerce

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ABSTRACT

Medical Tourism is a fast growing industry as patients from all around the world travel from one country to another for healthcare. Medical tourism will continue to raise competition and keep domestic providers in check of their pricing and perhaps allow already strained systems the opportunity to become more efficient and affordable. Various countries like Thailand, Malaysia, India, etc are promoting medical tourism aggressively. 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. India has the potential to become a global hub, provided the government promotes medical tourism and allows concessions. The healthcare sector is India's largest employer and any support to attract foreign patients will automatically make India to generate foreign exchange. This paper focuses on Scope and future of Medical Tourism in India.

Laws (1996) has defined medical tourism as a travel from home to other destination to improve one's health condition as one type of leisure.

Connell (2006) describes medical tourism as a popular mass culture where people travel to overseas countries to obtain healthcare services and facilities such as medical, dental and surgical care whilst having the opportunity to visit the tourist spots of that country. Carrera and Bridges (2006) have defined medical tourism as travel which is systematically planned to maintain one's physical and mental health condition.

Bookman & Bookman (2007) have defined medical tourism as travel with the aim of improving one's health, and also an economic activity that entails trade in services and represents two sectors: medicine and tourism. Medical tourism according to Dhaene (2009) is looking for available quality combined with cost effective and low price health services while offering a similar level of safety to the patient.

Medical tourism (also called medical travel, health tourism or global healthcare) is a term initially coined by travel agencies and the mass media to describe the rapidly-growing practice of travelling across international borders to obtain health care.

Services typically sought by travelers include elective procedures as well as complex specialized surgeries such as joint replacement (knee/hip), cardiac surgery, dental surgery, and cosmetic surgeries. Individuals with rare genetic disorders may travel to another country where treatment of these conditions is better understood. However, virtually every type of health care, including psychiatry, alternative treatments and even burial services are available. Over 50 countries have identified medical tourism as a national industry. However, accreditation and other measures of quality vary widely across the globe, and some destinations may become hazardous or even dangerous for medical tourists. In the context of global health, the term "medical tourism" is pejorative because during such trips health care providers often practice outside of their areas of expertise or hold different (i.e., lower) standards of care.

HISTORY

The first recorded instance of medical tourism dates back thousands of years to when Greek pilgrims traveled from all over the Mediterranean to the small territory in the Saronic Gulf called Epidauria. This territory was the sanctuary of the healing god Asklepios. Epidauria became the original travel destination for medical tourism.

Spa towns and sanitariums 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.

Tour operators have started putting together 'Medical Tour India' packages that allow to combine a sight-seeing tour with medical treatment. On offer are dental care packages, cosmetic treatment packages, heart surgery packages, orthopaedic surgery packages, heart care packages, even spine surgery packages.

As per established estimates, a heart bypass costs \$144,000 in the US, \$25,000 in Costa Rica, \$24,000 in Thailand, \$20,000 in Mexico, \$13,500 in Singapore and \$8,500 in India. Attracted by the lower costs, the availability of latest medical technologies, English-speaking doctors and nurses and a growing compliance on global quality standards, medical tourism is seeing a boom in India. Medical practitioners say cardiac and orthopaedic procedures constitute the majority of the tourism market followed by dental, cancer surgery, diagnosis for obesity and IVF treatment.

Earlier, patients visited India only for treatment, now there's also demand for post-operative therapy. "A new concept of post-operative rejuvenation therapy has evolved, where after surgery, the tourists come to pristine locations for follow-up treatment and relaxation instead of staying in the hospital," explains Dr PA Lalitha, managing director, Malabar Hospitals, and chairperson, women's wing, Indian Medical Association Kerala.

While cost obviously plays a significant role in choosing India's medical services, doctors here believe that it's also the quality of services provided here that makes the difference. "What these people want is the best medical treatment available across the globe.

According to industry body ASSOCHAM, India's medical tourism sector is expected to jump to Rs.10, 800 crore by 2015 from Rs. 4500 crore in 2011 and it is also estimated that it will cross 15000 crore by 2016.

The inflow of medical tourists in India is 32 lakh in 2015 from last year's level of 8.5 lakh. And it is likely to cross 40 lakhs by 2015. The cost of surgery in India is one-tenth of what it is in the US and Western Europe and sometimes even less". "India has the potential to become a global hub, provided the government promotes medical tourism and allows concessions. The healthcare sector is India's largest

employer and any support to attract foreign patients will automatically make India to generate foreign exchange. "Indian doctors are the most preferred as they possess a combination of professionalism and compassion". In India health care services are provided by doctors and nurses with a smiling face.

GROWTH OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN INDIA

After the globalization and liberalization of Indian economy on 1991, the government of India has opened up medical service to the voluntary and private sectors for foreign tourists and other citizens who can pay to get the high-tech medical services. The rapid growth of the private sector over the 1980s and the emergence of a corporate health sector in the 1990s was a part of the comprehensive policy that chooses to promote these segments. This was done through shifting subsidies in terms of cheap land, concessions from equipment and drug import, placing these institutions on government panels and making them a part of government insurance schemes in addition to providing trained personnel and expert physicians through state-supported medical education.

The main reasons for the growing popularity in medical tourism in India are: (a.) the long waiting lists in the developed countries, (b) the low cost of medical treatments in India than the other developed countries. In India, complicated surgical procedures are being done at one-tenth of the cost as compared to the procedures in the developed countries, (c) The affordable international air fares and favorable exchange rates, (d) Information through Internet; with the development of communications, new companies have emerged who acts as middlemen between international patients and hospital networks, giving patients easy access to information, prices and option. (e) the state-of-art technology, specialist doctors, nurses and para-medical staffs that has been adopted by the big hospitals and diagnostics centers in India. In India, the medical education system also caters to the ever increasing demand for the delivery of the quality health care services all over the country

India has a very old civilization of more than 5000 years and is known for the cultural and religious diversities with diverse geographical landmarks. In India, according to the famous words "*Atithi Devo Bhava*" refers tourists are treated as God. In India, in addition to existence of modern medicine, indigenous or traditional medical practitioners continue to practice throughout the country. Popular indigenous healthcare traditions include Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Naturopathy, and Yoga. Ayurveda provides a complete system of preventive medicine and healthcare, which has been proven as its effectiveness over a long period in India. The science of Ayurveda is based on the knowledge of the human constitution.

The Siddha system defines disease as the condition in which the normal equilibrium of the five elements (namely ether, air, fire, water and earth) in human beings is lost resulting in different forms of discomfort. Unani system of medicine believes in promotion of health, prevention of diseases and cure.

Naturopathy believes that the human body possesses inherent self-constructing and self-healing powers. its specific treatment takes into account the totality of factors responsible for diseases such as one's unnatural habits in living, thinking, working, sleeping, or relaxation, and the environmental factors that disturb the normal functioning of the body. Yoga is a science as well an art of healthy living physically, mentally, morally and spiritually.

ISSUES TO THE MEDICAL TOURISM INDUSTRY IN INDIA

The country like India is facing the following issues/challenges to become a tourist destination with competent medical tourism industry. They are:

1. Lack of infrastructural facilities like lack of connectivity, lack of coordinating system, poor power supply and poor water supply.

2. Most Indian hospitals are also facing the lack of trust from the foreign patients.

3. The government can play a vital part to upgrade the medical tourism sector. They are: (a) regulations, (b) taxation anomalies, (c) bureaucratic unnecessary interference, (d) lack of long-term investor friendly policies and (e) instability with respect to terrorism and communal tensions.

4. The medical tourism industry in India is also facing some key problems. They are: (a) inadequate insurance cover, (b) underdeveloped insurance market in India, (c) insurance frauds and (d) overseas companies refusing reimbursement.

5. The following challenges, due to the infrastructural parts in medical tourism sector in India, are: (a) poor accessibility, (b) lack of capital, (c) lack of Community participation and awareness, (d) lack of involvement from rural sector, (e) lack of concern for sustainability, (f) complex visa procedures, (g) lack of good language translators, and (h) poor airport facilities.

6. Apart from these, there are some specific issues to promote medical tourism in India. They are: (a) quality accreditations to the Indian hospitals and service providers, (b) training and Development to the Doctors, Nurses and Para medical staffs, (c) lack of customer oriented approach

SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING INDIAN MEDICAL TOURISM

The government of India must act as a regulator to institute a uniform grading and accreditation system for hospitals to build consumers' trust. It also acts as a facilitator to encourage private investment in medical infrastructure and policy-making for improving medical tourism.

Simplified systems of getting medical visas should be developed in order to make travel across borders smoother.

To market India's specialized healthcare products in the world and also address the various issues confronting the corporate healthcare sector, leading private hospitals across the country should set up national-level organizations.

Various value added services may be offered to the patients. Like, hospitals may have kiosks at airports, offer airport pickups, bank transactions, or tie-ups with airlines for tickets and may help facilitate medical visas by the government.

To counter increasing competition in medical tourism sector, Indian hospitals should tie-up with foreign institutions for assured supply of medical tourists.

CONCLUSION

The government should take steps in the role of a regulator and also as a facilitator of private investment in healthcare. Mechanisms need to be evolved to enable quicker visa grants to foreign tourists for medical purposes where patients can contact the Immigration Department at any point of entry for quick clearance. 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.

Medical Tourism is a fast growing industry as patients from all around the world travel from one country to another for healthcare. Insurance companies are offering international provider networks to insureds, employers using medical tourism facilitators and highly developed international patient centers. Market opportunities due to affordability and accessibility make just about every destination a potential for medical tourism to someone.

Medical tourism will continue to raise competition and keep domestic providers in check of their pricing and perhaps allow

already strained systems the opportunity to become more efficient and affordable. And healthcare cities and medical clusters will facilitate the average patient's search for high quality of care overseas and offer valuable solutions to current healthcare needs.

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