



TOOTH VACATION- TRANSFORMING THE TOURISM INDUSTRY!

Dental Science

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ABSTRACT

With the rise in advertisements and promotional activities people all over the world are now willing for an extra edge in their vacations alongside the normal leisure activities. Medical tourism is now well known to almost every travel enthusiast seeking an opinion about his or her health while exploring the country. There is a rise in concern regarding one's oral health and having a smile to gain appreciation for. People are visiting countries providing affordable dental care with the best of infrastructural facilities. This review explores dental tourism as an upcoming industry and the key aspects regarding its scope and challenges to be dealt with to transform the future.

KEYWORDS

Health, Oral health, Dental tourism, Medical tourism

INTRODUCTION

Vacations are fascinating but how about going that extra mile for correcting your smile?

In the present day setting, medical tourism has widely gained popularity and been identified as a potential area for uplifting the country's economy. It has been described as "travel across international borders with the intention of receiving some form of medical treatment. This treatment may span the full range of medical services, but most commonly includes dental care, cosmetic surgery, elective surgery and fertility treatment"¹.

In India this sector is likely to touchdown Rs 12000 crore thereby experiencing a growth rate of around 30% in the coming years². Medical services have now been included as a part of travel tour packages in order to captivate the interests of people. During the last two decades' countries like Hungary, South Africa, Thailand and Turkey have also emerged as the hubs of medical tourism³.

Oral diseases have now become a major health burden due to the changes in lifestyle, dietary habits and genetic endowment, building it into a concern for the public health sector. With the government and other organizations creating awareness about oral health, the aspirants seeking dental care are on the rise. Dental tourism also called dental vacations is now incorporated as a part of medical tourism⁴. Here, the chief goal of the individual is to seek dental treatment exterior to their local healthcare delivery system coupled with their vacation⁵.

According to a survey carried out in Switzerland, one fifth of the Swiss had already seen a dentist abroad, mostly in Germany and France, followed by Hungary and Italy⁶. It has been reported that Americans are travelling to Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, and South Korea for undergoing various dental services⁴.

Quality dental care rendered at an affordable cost is pivotal in promoting the tourism sector in our country to the international community⁴. The need of the hour is to promote the importance of good oral health along with the skills and technologies available in our country for rendering the services. This review is an attempt to provide a glimpse and discuss regarding the outlook of dental care tourism in India.

SCOPE OF DENTAL TOURISM IN INDIA

Medical tourism is actually an age old concept. In ancient Greece,

pilgrims and patients came from all over the Mediterranean to the sanctuary of the healing God, Asklepios (the Rod of Asclepius, a symbol associated with medicine and health care), at Epidaurus^{7,8}. Likewise, In the Neolithic and Bronze age, people used to visit neighboring countries for minerals and hot springs⁹.

India is the country where tourism accounts for 9% of gross domestic product¹⁰. Amongst the SAARC nations, India is second largest after Thailand in accommodating foreign patients¹¹. In 2012 about 3% of total Foreign Tourists Arrivals (FTAs) were for medical treatment¹². Furthermore India boasts of 38 hospitals accredited by the Joint Commission International making it a preferred choice by the foreign tourists¹³.

Dentistry is catching up at a fast pace as tourists' flock down to India due to its affordable treatment charges as compared to other nations. The difference in the cost of dental procedures between US and India is worth a thought³.

With the best infrastructure and facilities, the treatment can be carried out at the lowest charges. What makes it all the more alluring are the existing services rendered by Ayurveda, Naturopathy in its most authentic form making it an excellent choice for chronic illnesses and rejuvenation along with improving one's oral health.

Opening of centres for high-tech dental and medical healthcare facilities, promotion and participation at international fairs, recruiting travel agents for providing information and guidance to foreign patients, arranging for lodging and travel along with dental treatment are some initiatives, if taken up can help contribute to the growth of dental tourism⁹.

In addition to this, the reduced waiting period for patients is another factor that has contributed to dental tourism. Tourists from UK generally prefer travelling abroad for a quick-fix smile rather than waiting for an appointment under the National Health Service(NHS) scheme¹⁴. Kerala has now become a hub of catering to the dental needs of tourists. Experienced health practitioners, good communication skills, combination of various systems of medicine, availability of super speciality centres and advanced diagnosis makes the state an attractive place for travellers². Similarly, Jaipur and Goa have also earned a place in the dental tourism industry. With the existence of an eco-friendly environment and high end medical and dental healthcare facilities, Indian tourism can carve a niche for itself by amalgamation of all public-private sectors and creating opportunities for skilled professionals to boost the economy of the country.

CHALLENGES OF DENTAL TOURISM IN INDIA

Health care accounts for just about 3% of India's gross domestic product¹⁵. When compared to countries like US, Brazil, Italy and South Africa, we are still far behind in achieving 'health-for-all'. Infrastructure required for the travel and tourism industry range from modes of transport to accessible roads, electricity, water supply, sewerage and telecommunication¹⁶. This remains a major hurdle in our country. Inadequate infrastructure facilities affect tourism leading to an increase in the efflux of domestic tourists to other neighbouring countries with better healthcare provision.

Marketing and promotion of the industry is essential. Lack of adequate monetary funds compared to other tourist destinations, is a major reason for India lagging behind. Although the "Incredible India" campaign helped place our country as a much favoured tourist destination on the global tourism map yet there is a dire need to change the traditional marketing approach to one with a modern touch¹⁶.

Rules and regulations subjected to visa procedures are seen as a hindrance. Earlier patients had to visit an immigration office under India's special visa norms where they were granted a special M visa which was generally valid for one year¹¹. This did not seem to be feasible for many patients as a result of which they were forced to choose countries like Thailand and Singapore where the procedure was much easier and smoother¹¹.

However, in August 2019, the Government of India has made it easier for foreigners to receive medical treatment without necessarily applying for a medical visa. These initiatives undertaken by the ministry will help medical tourism market to reach around \$9 Billion in 2020⁸.

In Western countries, dental insurance is into force but in India it is still in its infancy stage with only a few handful insurance companies covering dental procedures¹⁷. National health schemes by the government should also cover the oral health aspects so that the average Indian citizen and low income groups can afford dental care.

The standard of infection control in the destination countries is an issue for the dental tourist^{14,18}. In developed countries like the United States, optimal infection control and protection for patients is the main priority for the dentists. But in third world countries Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations are not important and the patient receiving treatment lack the assurance of patient safety or proper infection control¹⁹.

Another consideration is the lack of appropriate training. In the United States and Europe most of the dental schools provide highly skilled and technically advanced training²⁰. But in Eastern Countries the standards and quality of dental training is not regular and do not follow a uniform standard¹⁹.

In addition to this, dentistry is neglected in our country. Despite the progress not much awareness drives have been made related to its importance. Every year there are over 24,500 dental graduates²¹. Due to lack of job opportunities there are thousands of young dental graduates who are not being able to contribute even after having the interest to do so. Dental negligence needs to be eradicated and initiatives should be taken up towards this field so as to help people improve their oral health, which is a gateway to systemic health.

CONCLUSION

India is home to rich cultural heritage and alternative forms of medicine to attract foreign tourists. Dental tourism can be achieved by mixing vacations with dental care at reputed dental and medical centres across the country. The government must encourage for public-private partnerships and investing for attainment of highest level of healthcare. Dental tourism needs to be promoted at international platforms. The Dental Council of India with the help of Indian Dental Association along with its state branches can come up with attractive policies for the tourists. Dentists all over the country should be sensitized and motivated to renovate and reform their daily practice and adopt newer proposals to attract foreign tourists at their workplaces.

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