

MEDICAL TOURISM- A NEW DIMENSION OF TOURISM SECTOR

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Abstract

Medical Tourism can be defined as provision of “cost effective” Private medical care in collaboration with the tourism industry for patients. This process is being facilitated by the corporate sector involved in medical care as well as the tourism industry. Medical tourism is the practice of travelling abroad in order to receive medical treatment. It is a travel of a people to another country for the purpose of obtaining medical treatment in that country. Now a days people don't have time for themselves. Everybody wanted to have a small trip, everybody needs a change but time is the major constraint. When the things go wrong with the health we found out time for our self. When along with a small trip it is possible to cure a disease or with a small tour in a minimum amount when it's possible to get relief from the health issues, medical tourism takes place. Cost effective care is important with a small trip. This is the major reason for a hike in medical tourism industry. It's not wrong if I say that medical tourism will soon be a backbone of the whole tourism sector. Medical tourism generally is done because of lower cost treatment, it facilitate better doctor and hospital facilities and majorly because of it gives a chance to people to incorporate local therapies like Yoga, Ayurveda, Thai Massage, Chinese acupuncture and many more regional therapies. In this paper I am going to find out major reasons for boom in medical tourism and more opportunities as well as threats for the sector.

Keywords

E-visa, M (medical) visas, Joint Commission International (JCI), Neoliberal policy, Indian Medical Association (IMA)

Introduction

With the considerable amount of advancement in technology and the emergence of medical experts India has come up as a prime destination for medical tourists from around the globe. Patients from all over the world travel to India for availing the optimum quality of treatment at low prices. The top hospitals in India ensure to keep up with the expectations of these Medical tourists. The medical tourism in India is expected to grow at a rate of 20% between 2014 and 2018. It is formally a promising sector for India, poised to reach USD 6 billion by the year 2018. Medical tourism in India is becoming more popular as patients are seeking better and cheaper options for treatment in India. And, India has started to make its presence felt firmly in the medical tourism sector that was initially dominated by developed countries like the US and Singapore, Thailand as well. Medical tourism in India is dominated by some of the most popular medical treatments in the area of Cardiology, Neurology, and Orthopedics. As the major cities in India are well connected by air and other modes of transportation, with all of the leading global airlines operating, Indian medical tourism is booming. The government of India has also recently relaxed visa norms and has implemented a new E-visa policy which also proactively works towards increasing medical tourism in India.

Medical tourism in India is not a new concept for the country. In fact tourism itself starts for the medicinal reasons in India at ancient times. There is a good history for medical tourism in India. Yoga had gained popularity around 5000 years ago in Indian history. India medical science is as old as the Indus civilization. In past times also India had been visited by constant stream of health travelers seeking to heal themselves through Ayurveda. Ayurveda has always been preserved by the people of India as a traditional “science of life” from thousands of years. Susutra was a very famous surgeon of ancient India and it is researched that he was doing almost all surgeries which are developed in the latest centuries. One can say that the concept of medical travel is as old as medicine itself. Medical tourism history in fact dates back to ancient times. As early as 5000 years ago, constant streams of medical travelers and spiritual students flocked to India to seek the benefits of these alternative-healing methods. So with a good historical background medical tourism is growing in India. India is increasingly seen as the favorite

destination of “medical tourists” who cross national boundaries to seek treatment that is cheaper than in their home countries. Medical tourism is a multi-billion dollar industry promoted by governments and the medical and tourism industries. Patients who travel abroad for medical treatment do so for a variety of reasons. The elite from developing countries seek treatments not available in their own countries. Patients from the United States seek treatments that cost five to 10 times in their own country. And, as public-funded health insurance is unable to cope with the rising demands of an increasingly aging population, patients from countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada travel to India to beat the huge waiting period for many routine procedures. The key selling points of the Indian medical tourism industry are the combination of high quality facilities, competent, English-speaking medical professionals, “cost effectiveness” and the attractions of tourism. The cost differential is huge.

Medical tourism in India is becoming more popular as patients are seeking better and cheaper options for treatment in India. And, India has started to make its presence felt firmly in the medical tourism sector that was initially dominated by developed countries like the US and Singapore to name a few. With the growing pharmaceutical industry, cheap and ease in traveling, the growth of insurance market and improvement in health care, all work towards making India a preferred medical tourism destination. Medical tourism is not only a sector it has become an industry. The country like India can take the advantage as through small investments in infrastructure and the professionalism can grab the advantage for boosting the economy and finding new employment opportunities in this sector. AV Guruva Reddy, managing director of the Hyderabad-based Sunshine Hospitals, said the general standard of hygiene and technology in Indian medical facilities had improved. Hospitals are ready to get accredited with global standards. Government also has understood that medical tourism is the easiest way to enter in the world wide competition for tourism sector. Because of diversity people would like to visit India and people are interested in local medical treatments as well as they are comparatively cheap and affordable. The key selling points of the Indian medical tourism industry are the combination of high quality facilities, competent, English-speaking medical professionals, “cost effectiveness” and the attractions of tourism. Two other major factors are the sustained growth of corporate

hospitals and hospital chains across India and government patronage and promotion of medical tourism as part of public policy

Following are the reasons why India is preferred worldwide for Medical Tourism:

- Quality healthcare at reasonable costs
- Savings for the patient
- World-class doctors
- Customized approach
- Quality Infrastructure and availability of people.
- Availability of High Skilled Doctors boosts medical tourism in India
- Alternative Treatment Options while opting medical tourism in India
- Attractive Locations
- Availability of accredited hospitals for Global standards
- Many local therapies are done by the local people.
- Hospitality and care makes India different from the other countries
- Contribution and involvement of Indian Government for boosting tourism
- Personal touch by the doctors and the people involved in it.
- Involvement of corporate sectors as globally accepted
- Reliability and assurance and the positive results are the major reasons for medical tourism in India.
- Medical tourism in India is generally done for cosmetic surgery, cardiology, dentistry, reproduction, yoga, ayurveda and local therapies.

- India has several doctors that are active and treat people immediately. The patients do not have to wait for long hours to get a medical help.
- The neighboring countries of India has very limited or no health-care facilities which draws patients to India.

Current scenario of Indian Medical Tourism

The country is witnessing 22-25 per cent growth in medical tourism and healthcare providers expect the industry will double to \$6 billion by 2018 from \$3 billion. It is projected to grow to \$7–8 billion by 2020. The number of foreign tourists coming to the country for medical purposes increased 50 per cent to 200,000 in 2016 from 130,000 in 2015. This number is expected to double in 2017 with several new initiatives like easier visas for medical tourists. Promoted by the government and fuelled by the corporate boom in medical care, India is increasingly seen as the favored destination of “medical tourists” who cross national boundaries to seek treatment that is cheaper than in their home countries. According to the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), the primary reason that attracts medical value travel to India is cost-effectiveness, and treatment from accredited facilities at par with developed countries at much lower cost. The Medical Tourism Market Report: 2015 found that India was "one of the lowest cost and highest quality of all medical tourism destinations, it offers wide variety of procedures at about one-tenth the cost of similar procedures in the United States." Medical tourism is a multi-billion dollar industry promoted by governments and the medical and tourism industries.

Patients who travel abroad for medical treatment do so for a variety of reasons. The elite from developing countries seek treatments not available in their own countries. Thus private hospitals in India are seeing an influx of patients from Bangladesh and the Gulf. Patients from the United States seek treatments that cost five to 10 times in their own country. And, as public-funded health insurance is unable to cope with the rising demands of an increasingly aging population, patients from countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada travel to India to beat the huge waiting period for many routine procedures.

The ministries of health, external affairs, tourism and culture are working to increase the number of medical tourists. The government provides online visas, multiple entries, extensions of stay, and accreditation to more hospitals. Several other measures are under way, according to the Indian Medical Association (IMA), the government has improved the visa policy to make it patient friendly. There is no waiting time for foreign patients at hospitals. India typically seeks joint replacement surgeries, heart, liver and bone marrow transplants, spine and brain surgeries, cancer and kidney treatments, and in vitro fertilization (IVF). Patients from Africa and the Middle East access private healthcare in India due to lack of facilities and doctors back home. Medical tourists from Europe and the US come here for cosmetic surgeries that are not covered by insurance. Non-resident Indians, prefer to come here for IVF and gynecology treatments. There are about 50 million uninsured Americans, who are willing to go abroad for quality and cost effective treatment. India is having more than 19 Joint Commission International (JCI) accreditation hospitals .Apollo hospital alone has treated 95000 international patients in 2013 and there is an annual growth of more than 25% in medical tourism sector.

In short Indian tourism sector has great opportunities for medical tourism sector and can contribute to GDP through this new dimension. Medical tourism is an easy new way to get success in tourism industry and, it's a support to tourism sector as well as business sector. One tourist brought much new business together. Medical care in India is typical of countries that have promoted segmentation in healthcare.

Globalization has also fostered a consumerist culture and the medical industry is sustained by this culture. It serves the fraction of the population that can pay the rates charged by the high end private medical sector. Corporate style functioning in medical care has also introduced the need to maximize profits and expand coverage – as in the case of any commercial venture. Thus, while neoliberal policies have opened the way for the penetration of the corporate sector in medical care, the industry now needs further avenues for its continued growth as the domestic market gets saturated. Visitors from 55 countries come to India for treatment but the biggest growth in business is from the UK and the US. The Taj Medical Group receives 200 inquiries a day from around the world and arranges packages for 20-40 Britons a month to have operations in India. It also offers follow-up appointments with a consultant in the UK. Apollo Hospital

Enterprises treated an estimated 60,000 patients between 2001 and 2004. Apollo now has 46 hospitals with over 7,000 beds and is in partnership with hospitals in Kuwait, Sri Lanka and Nigeria. The government predicts that India's healthcare industry could grow 13 per cent in each of the next six years, boosted by medical tourism which, industry watchers say, is growing at 30 per cent annually (4). Since 2006, the government has also started issuing M (medical) visas to patients and MX visas to the accompanying spouse. This is a winning ticket for the corporate medical sector and for a section of medical professionals in the country. However, if we look at the public health implications, we see an entirely different picture. The government would have us believe that revenues earned by the industry will strengthen healthcare in the country. But we do not see any mechanism by which this can happen. On the contrary, corporate hospitals have repeatedly dishonored the conditions for receiving government subsidies by refusing to treat poor patients free of cost – and they have got away without punishment. Moreover, reserving a few beds for the poor in elite institutions does not address the necessity to increase public investment in health to three to five times the present level.

The extra revenue from medical tourism could benefit healthcare in India if it were taxed adequately to support public health. Instead the medical tourism industry is provided tax concessions; the government gives private hospitals treating foreign patients benefits such as lower import duties and an increased rate of depreciation (from 25 per cent to 40 per cent) for life-saving medical equipment. Prime land is provided at subsidized rates. The industry also gets a pool of medical professionals who train in public institutions for fees of Rs 500 a month and then move to work in private hospitals – an internal brain drain, and an indirect subsidy for the private sector of an estimated Rs 500 crore per year . Thus, the price advantage of the medical tourism industry is paid for by Indian tax payers who receive nothing in return.




Let us take a good example of Cuba. This country has been a pioneer in medical tourism for almost four decades. It has hospitals for Cuban residents and others for foreigners and diplomats. Both kinds are run by the government. Cubans receive free healthcare for life while tourists have to pay for it. The Cuban government has developed medical tourism to generate income which is ploughed back to benefit its country's citizens. The Cuban example shows that there are ways to use medical tourism to really benefit our people. But we are then talking about entirely different

systems and underlying philosophies. Along with all the positive sides, there are many threats for medical tourism sector. There is a strong competition from countries like Thailand, Malaysia & Singapore. There is less overseas medical coverage by the insurance sectors, the benefits are very little. There is a more problem of under investment in health and infrastructure. Many a times there is a great exploitation of tourist by money changers. Global customers' perception is that India is unhygienic country, so cleanliness is the major major issue which needs to be sort out on a priority basis.

Conclusion

India is emerging as an attractive, affordable for health care but there are some challenges that the country has to overcome to become tourist destination with competent health care industry. The Government should step in the role of regulator and a facilitator in health care. An apex body for the industry needs to be formed to promote India Brand abroad. Establishment of MEDICITIES will help in India building a significant leadership position in Medical Tourism. Growing insurance market, strong pharmaceutical industry, cheap international travel, and quality health care are increasingly making India a preferred tourist destination. Medical tourism sector has great opportunities and strength. Some of the above mentioned threats are manageable and the others are assumed. With the help of good government intervention, public help, corporate support, India can be the major destination for medical tourism for the rest of the world. We really can hope that medical tourism industry along with the tourism sector will soon be a major component of GDP in Indian Economy. The recent case of Eman Ahmed from Egypt has lost her 500 kgs after taking the treatment from Indian doctors. The example has proven the world that India has full capacity to stand in the competition in global medical tourism.

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