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Medical tourism perspectives: A conceptual framework

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Abstract

Traveling for medical care is becoming more and more common as an alternative for treatment. The growth of the industry is happening rapidly in today's society, with the development of the Medical Tourism Association. This has helped to take the idea of going to another country for treatment, from being a far out and sometimes scary thought to making a lot of sense to patients insured and uninsured. The Country's ancient cultural heritage is inextricably linked to its technology driven present existence. The coexistence of a number of religions and cultures, together with an awe-inspiring topography makes it the perfect place for a complete holiday experience. India as a medical tourism destination is attracting the patients from advanced countries. The present research article is a conceptual framework of the Medical Tourism.

Keywords: Foreign patients, treatment, leisure travel, alternate medicine

Introduction

Medical tourist or health tourist has become a significant aspect of the global healthcare and travel industry. India, with its medical skill pool and associated infrastructure, has emerged as an important 'health care' destination. A Confederation of India industry (CII) and McKinsey study predicts an optimistic 25% rise in revenue from medical tourism every year. This could generate additional craning of Rs 50 to 100 billion by 2012.

The Government of India has recognized the tremendous potential of the medical tourism industry. It has introduced the medical visa to facilitate easy travel for foreign patients, formulated guidelines for prescribing minimum requirements for Ayurveda and Panchakarma centers and announced a whopping \$56.5 billion investment for the medical tourism industry.

In sharp contrast to the private sector player in the industry. Public health care services are poor in India. The private sector contributes to nearly 80% of the health care expenditure. In other words, it is the private players (corporate hospitals) which are actually pushing medical tourism. The medical tourism industry is unregulated and there are no self-regulatory guidelines in India or abroad.

History of medical tourism

Medical tourism is often thought of as a recent phenomenon. The truth, however, is that people have been traveling long distances to better their health for thousands of years. Granted, it's hard to picture a swarthy chieftain traipsing across the desert on his camel to barter for a nicer set of pearly whites. Were clinics and hospitals even around that long ago, thousands of years ago?

Archaeological evidence from the third millennium B.C. suggests that ancient Mesopotamians traveled to the temple of a healing god or goddess at Tell Brak, Syria, in search of a cure for eye disorders. A few thousand years later the Greeks and Romans would travel by foot or ship to spas and cult centers all around the Mediterranean. The Asclepia Temples, dedicated in honor of the Greek god of medicine, were some of the world's first health centers. Pilgrims would sometimes spend several nights in the temple, hoping Asclepius would appear in a dream and suggest a diagnosis or treatment.

Later in the 16th and 17th centuries, spa towns such as St. Moritz and Bath became prime destinations for the European upper classes looking to soothe their ills.

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What kind of “procedures” were the ancients seeking? No butt lifts or hip and knee replacements, that’s for sure. Many were looking for “healing” waters or the benevolence of the gods to cure common ailments of the time such as rheumatism, syphilis, gonorrhoea, blindness and paralysis. Modern medical tourism as we know it today has largely been the result of several factors including the high cost of medical care in first world nations, ease of long distance travel, and advances in information technology.

Factors behind medical tourism

The reasons patients travel for treatment vary and there has been a steep rise in the number of patients going for medical tourism. Let’s look at some of the reasons for this growing trend: Healthcare and medical facilities in advanced countries is very expensive in comparison to Asian countries. Moreover the public healthcare system in some of the countries takes much more time than anticipated. The long waiting time, high costs direct many people to consider medical tourism as a lucrative option.

Other factors such as ease and affordability of international travel, rapid improvement in technology and high standards of medical care in the developing countries has all contributed development of medical tourism, which has proved to be cost effective. Medical care in Asian countries cost just one-tenth of the costs in U.S.A. For example- The Cost of Heart Surgery in India is \$6,000 compared with \$30,000 in the United States. Angioplasty cost \$11,000 in India, 13,000 in Thailand but the same procedure will cost \$57,000 in US. There is a huge difference, yet the cost of the treatment still remains to be just a fraction of the cost in the U.S and the cost includes the airfare, stay and a small vacation package.

When it comes to health care, safety is the prime concern among patients. Several of the hospitals in countries such as India, Thailand, Singapore, etc. possess state-of-the-art facilities, skilled medical professionals and medical care on par with western countries. Apart from offering world class treatments, they offer various services that make medical tourists’ stay hassle free. Many hospitals have international accreditations that certify the quality of health care service with minimum waiting time. These hospital offer treatments such as Cardiology, Cardiothoracic Surgery, Urology, Dental surgery, Oncology, Orthopedic surgery, Pediatrics, General Medicines and General Surgery.

Of all the Asian countries, Singapore is first to work towards increasing its 200,000 tourists a year to a million by 2012. Thailand has recorded at least 6000,000 new patient arrivals a year. Malaysia is next which has treated more than 100,000 tourist patients in 2005. Apart from these countries India is the next most sought after destinations for medical tourism. Medical tourism in India has been growing at the rate of 20% per annum. The year 2004, saw some 150,000 medical tourists from UK, US, Middle East and other foreign countries visiting Indian hospitals seeking medical care.

Types of medical tourism

- **Outbound:** This type of medical tourism occurs when patients travel from the home country to a foreign country to receive medical treatment.

- **Inbound:** This type involves patients traveling from a foreign country to the home country in search of medical care.
- **Domestic or Intrabound:** Refers to patients traveling to another part of their own country. No international travel happens.

Inbound vs. Outbound Medical Tourism

In the United States, medical tourism is broken into two distinct groups: inbound. With outbound medical tourism, American patients travel to another country to receive medical care. In 2007, an estimated 750,000 Americans participated in out bound medical tourism (Deloitte 2009). Inbound medical tourists travel from other countries to receive health care services in the United States that they can,t get or have to wait too long to receive in their country. Each year, an estimated 250,000 people travel to the United States for treatment (Bookman and Bookman 2007). Sometimes, Americans might also be considered inbound medical tourists when they travel from their home in one state to a hospital in another state to take advantage of a specialized procedure that is not available in their area, or a lower-cost surgery than they can receive in their local hospitals.

India has a very old civilization of more than 5000 years and is known for her cultural and religious diversities with diverse geographical landmarks. The traditional arts and crafts add to her appeal to attract tourists. 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. If every individual knows his or her own constitution, they can understand what constitutes a good diet and lifestyle for themselves. The five great elements, viz., ether, air, fire, water and earth are manifested into the three Dashas or biological organizations known as Vata, Pitta and Kapha. These biological organizations are used by an individual to gain a full understanding of all aspects of bodily functions, in order to establish the harmonious balance required for a healthy existence. Ayurveda is based on natural herbs, which gives distinct advantage.

The Siddha system defines disease as the condition in which the normal equilibrium of the five elements in human beings is lost resulting in different forms of discomfort. The diagnostic methods in Siddha medical system are based more on the clinical acumen of the physician after observation of the patient, pulse and diagnosis and clinical history. Unani system of medicine believes that the body is made up of four basic elements viz., earth, air, water and fire, which have different temperaments i.e. cold, hot, wet and dry. After mixing and interaction of four elements a new compound having new temperament comes into existence i.e. hot-wet, hot-dry, cold-wet and cold-dry. Unani system of medicine believes in promotion of health, prevention of diseases and cure.

Review of literature

Cesario ^[1] feels that medical tourism is an emerging industry that facilitates travel to another country for people who seek medical, surgical, or dental care that is unavailable or more affordable than in their home countries. Rapid advances in electronic communication and the ease of international travel have fueled the growth of this industry. More than half of medical travelers are women, especially for services related to cosmetic or reproductive conditions. Medical tourism creates both opportunities and challenges for nurses and other health care providers. Consumers' increased access to the global health care market necessitates the development of a structure that shapes the medical tourism industry and addresses evolving ethical, political, and human rights concerns related to this industry.

Green ^[2] opines that medical tourism is the practice of traveling outside of a patient's local area for the sole purpose of accessing medical services, which may include international travel. Associated risks include all the issues common to practitioners of international travel medicine, including a range of tropical conditions, with additional bespoke risks related to the type of medical care itself. Quality control, risk, and safety are key issues but difficult to control for, especially if the health care provider is not engaging in independent holistic accreditation or some similarly robust external review process. Patients can return to their home country with on-going health care and other needs related to their treatment and/or problems resulting purely from having traveled overseas. The range of services available through medical tourism continues to grow. New risks and problems are identified from time to time. Medical tourism throws up a range of ethical and legal issues which merit discussion.

Gaines and Lee ^[3] contend that medical tourism is defined as travel primarily for the purpose of receiving health care. Medical tourists may travel for a variety of procedures, including novel or experimental treatments. Medical tourists may also travel to developing or developed countries. Medical tourism represents a growing health care market, and this group of travelers presents unique challenges for public health and clinical medicine. In addition to traditional travel health recommendations, medical tourists have unique health needs and should be advised accordingly. Some of these needs include ensuring current medical conditions are stable enough for travel and the need for appropriate follow-up care after procedures.

The scoping review focuses on medical tourism, whereby consumers elect to travel across borders or to overseas destinations to receive their treatment. Such treatments include: cosmetic and dental surgery; cardio, orthopaedic and bariatric surgery; IVF; and organ and tissue transplantation. The review assesses the emerging focus of research evidence post-2010. The narrative review traverses discussion on medical tourism definitions and flows, consumer choice, clinical quality and outcomes, and health

systems implications. Attention is drawn to gaps in the research evidence.

Top destinations for medical tourism across the globe

Medical tourism is the movement of people of different nations to the other countries to access medical treatment which is either not offered in their home countries or is offered at a lower cost in other countries. The most common form of medical tourism is surgery, which could either be health related or for cosmetic purposes.

In many cases, the treatments are a success. However, there are negative consequences that may come with it such as low standard post-treatment care that can worsen a patient's condition. Sometimes, those accompanying the patient may get exposed to other diseases that are prevalent in countries they are visiting. The following are the top destinations for medical tourism in the world.

Thailand

Thailand is located in the southeast of Asia. The country has about 39 approved hospitals offering excellent medical services which have led to it being one of the most reliable and preferred medical tourism destinations in the world. Previously, Thailand was known for its high standard dental treatment. However, the country has not been left behind in keeping up with advancement in technologically related treatments, with the current one being sex reassignment treatment that has given the country a huge boost in terms of medical tourism.

Mexico

Mexico is located in the southern part of North America. In its early years after independence, it was categorized as a middle-class income country which has since changed and it is now among the top fifteen states experiencing economic upswing. It is served by medically trained students from America and has its treatment costs lower than most parts of America. The low cost of medication and availability of medical staff has given it an edge over the rest of the states in America in terms of patient traffic accessing the treatment. However, there are still some parts in the rural settings that do not have access to the advanced equipment and patients have to move to urban areas to seek treatment.

United States

The United States of America is one of the largest countries in the world by total area and human population. It is known for its technological advancement with many discoveries having originated in the country. It has significantly contributed to the major innovations in the medical field, making it one of the most preferred destinations for medical tourism. It offers various medical procedures ranging from health related issues, cosmetic surgery, sex reassignment and other advanced treatments.

Singapore

Singapore is located in the southeast of Asia. It is ranked among the top ten nations with excellent systems of health care by the World Health Organization. The country has accredited medical facilities where the cost of treatment is lower than most of developed countries. The low cost of treatment has resulted in Singapore being one of the most preferred destinations for people seeking medical treatment across the globe. It attracts nationalities from both

¹ Cesario, Sandra K. "Implications of Medical Tourism." *Nursing for Women's Health* 22, no. 3 (June 1, 2018): 269–73.

² Green, Stephen T. "158 - Medical Tourism." In *Hunter's Tropical Medicine and Emerging Infectious Diseases (Tenth Edition)*, edited by Edward T. Ryan, David R. Hill, Tom Solomon, Naomi E. Aronson, and Timothy P. Endy, 1124–27.

³ Gaines, Joanna, and C. Virginia Lee. "39 - Medical Tourism." In *Travel Medicine (Fourth Edition)*, edited by Jay S. Keystone, Phyllis E. Kozarsky, Bradley A. Connor, Hans D. Nothdurft, Marc Mendelson, and Karin Leder, 371–75. London: Elsevier, 2019.

developed and third world countries. It also enjoys political stability which makes other nationalities comfortable when visiting the country.

India

The Republic of India is the second most populous country in the world. India has highly rated medical facilities and offers treatment at a lower cost compared to other countries such as the United States. The level of compliance in terms of standards of the medical procedures has also contributed to it being one of the most preferred medical tourism destinations in the world. Most people traveling to India enjoy the ease of access following waiver of visa restrictions by the government. English is spoken widely in India and is a popular language used by the medical professionals of the country, which contributes to the ease of communication with many travelers.

Taiwan

Taiwan has experienced gradual expansion in medical tourism in recent years. With advances in the treatment of cardiac diseases and orthopedic conditions in the country, Taiwan is on the verge of becoming a hub in these medical fields. Taiwan boasts as the first in kidney transplant in Asia. The National Taiwan University Hospital, where the procedure was performed, provides affordable and high-quality treatment for medical tourists. Also, the first ever pediatric liver transplant in Asia was performed by surgeons at the Chang Gung Memorial Hospital, where over 400 of such procedures have been done so far. Patients generally save 40% to 55% in healthcare cost in Taiwan compared to the cost of similar services in the United States.

South Korea

South Korea is one of the most tech-savvy and technologically advanced countries in the world. In South Korea, patients receive advanced healthcare services with cutting-edge technology from well-trained staff. The Wooridul Spine Hospital in Seoul ranks at the top in minimally-invasive spinal surgery in the country, performing over 20,000 of such procedures annually. This hospital provides exquisite accommodation with spacious rooms, a personal computer, and two beds in case a travel companion comes along with the patient. Another reason medical tourists are attracted to South Korea is the insurance coverage offered to medical tourists. The insurance covers injury, stress disorders, and death of a patient which occur as a result of the procedures or treatment they receive. South

Korea reduces health cost by 30% to 45% for patients, compared to cost in the United States.

Costa Rica

As Costa Rica rebuilds its economy following the damage that was done by the Tropical Storm some months ago, it is fast rising as a leader in the medical tourism market. This Central American country has ranked high in dentistry and cosmetic surgery, above Canada and US, consistently in the last few years. The country is also building a name in the fields of eye surgery, cancer therapy, and bariatric surgery. The CheTica Ranch located in San Jose provides exotic recovery retreats for medical travelers for patients who relish recovery in a relaxing ambiance. This ranch is also staffed with highly-trained nurses to cater to the medical needs of these patients as they recover. Cost of healthcare services in Costa Rica is 45% to 65% lower than in the US, saving patients a lot of money.

Turkey

Turkey is a strong contender in the medical tourism market. Turkey boasts of zero waiting times, affordable and quality healthcare delivery. Specifically, in the areas of transplant surgery, radiation therapy for cancer, orthopedic surgery, neurosurgery, and genomic medicine. The country's national carrier, Turkish Airlines, offers flight rates at discounted prices to medical travelers. Cost of receiving quality healthcare in Turkey is 50% to 65% lower in Turkey than in the United States.

Brazil

The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that Brazil ranks as the best in healthcare delivery in Latin America. Brazil has 43 hospitals accredited by the JCI and it boasts of having world-renowned surgeons. Brazil is the hub of cosmetic and plastic surgery, being the third most visited country, below US and China, for patients needing those procedures. Brazil offers high quality cosmetic and plastic surgical services at affordable rates, drawing more and more health travelers to the country. Florianopolis and Sao Paulo are two cities in Brazil best known for cutting-edge medical technology, medical advances, and innovation. Brazil is also a favorite for patients who seek special procedures such as the Brazilian butt-lift or other specialty services from world-renowned surgeons. Health travelers from the US save 20% to 30% on health cost if they receive their health treatment in Brazil.

Table 1: Classification of the services spectrum of medical tourism across globe

	Wellness tourism	Alternative systems of medicine	Cosmetic surgery	Advanced and life savings healthcare
Services offered	Spas, Stress relief, rejuvenation centres	Ayurvedics, Siddha treatment for diseases e.g. Arthritis, Rheumatism	Dental Care, Plastic Surgery, Breast enhancement, Tummy reduction, Skin Treatment	Open transplants, cardio vascular surgery, Eye treatment, Hip Replacement, <i>In vitro</i> fertilization
Profit Margin	Low	Low	Medium	High
Key Competitors	Thailand, South Africa		South Africa, Cuba, Thailand	Singapore, Jordan, Thailand and Malaysia
India's Strength	Low –Thailand has captured a significant share of the market	High-Kerala is popular for this service	Low –South Africa and Thailand leads in plastic surgery	High-India has strong image on medical tourism

Medical tourism: A Bangalore perspective

Easy and affordable travel options

Which are travel becoming much easier and more affordable because of competitive pricing by several airlines vying with each other offer the best deal, the world seems a much smaller place today. Cities in India are well connected to most major cities of the world. Besides, all major cities in India are now connected by air to several smaller cities and towns within the country.

Easy of communication

In contrast to some other countries providing medical tourism, English is a language widely spoken in India. All doctors and most other health-care staff in corporate hospitals speak English, making it easy for patient from overseas to communicate with them.

Availability of drugs

The pharmaceuticals industry in India is one of the largest in the world and India exports drugs to several countries. Most medication are available at a comparatively lower cost than in Western countries.

A blend of modern and Traditional medicine

India offers the best treatment modern medicine for some of the most complex medical procedures, at par with those in developed countries, in specialties such as cardiology, ortho surgery, cancer therapy, eye care, gynecology and infertility treatments, cosmetic surgery and dental surgery, with some hospitals offering specialized services that are unavailable. Also available for certain ailments are a wide choice of traditional methods of rejuvenation and holistic

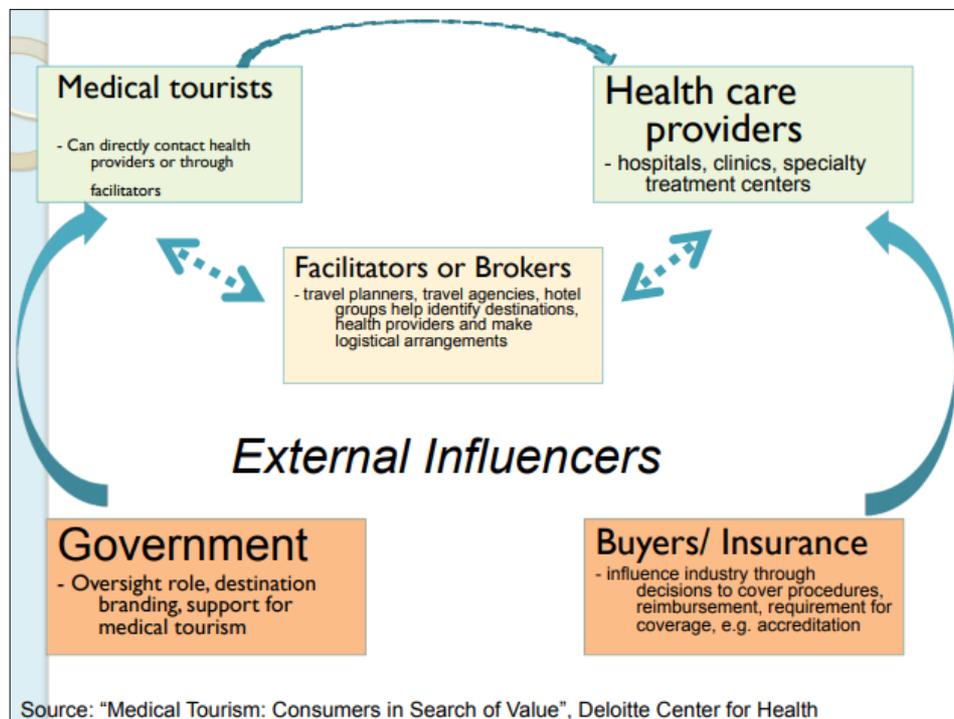
treatment in alternative medicine Ayurveda, Homeopathy, Neuropathy, Meditation and yoga.

Experience India!

Medical tourism in India is all about combining a medical procedure with a leisurely vacation to experience the beauty and rich cultural heritage of the country. If your medical procedure is a minor one and your doctor promises it, why not use the opportunity to visit some of this incredible country. Relax at one of the several picturesque sun-kissed beaches or go on a shopping spree. Enjoy the tranquility and serene beauty of the hills as you recuperate or get pampered at an Ayurvedic health spa. Experience the diverse and complex culture of India and beguile your taste buds with the delicious cuisines on offer.

The mechanism of medical tourism industry

Over recent decades it has been studied about the patterns of the medical tourism which shows that they are vague and unidirectional in nature. As in normal tourism the tourist check the preferences such as type of holiday, time to be spent, facilities, infrastructure and amount to be spent on a holiday, after this they think about the region in which they choose a hotel for stay and pick the most cost effective option, it is one of the alternative ways of medical tourism. But the right mechanism of the medical tourism can be said as, patient first decides about their own need and preferences related to medical condition. Once they know about the medical needs, then they move on to the other step to choose a country having a best medical facility according to their budget, which is the last step of the medical tourism. So, it can be concluded that price is not the main factor while choosing the services in medical tourism.



The Ecosystem of medical Tourism Industry

Current state of medical tourism in Bangalore

- Despite Bangalore having the largest number of medical colleges in the country, a critical shortage of healthcare workers exists, particularly in the public

sector and in rural areas. This is exacerbated by the government's laissez-faire approach to emigration, producing substantial losses in financial investment and human capital, as higher education in India is mostly

government subsidized. India has one of the world's largest international diaspora, while Indian doctors represent the largest number of foreign trained physicians in the US and UK. Some argue that a growing medical tourism industry could help retain health workers in Bangalore.

- Because human health resources are highly concentrated in the city's private sector, both the federal and state government have devised schemes to 'harness' the existing potentials of the private sector to serve the overwhelming majority of the population without health insurance. This includes the provision of land and facilities at concession rates in exchange for free outpatient services as well as duty and tax exemptions for medical equipment. However, these schemes largely benefit private health care facilities while incurring substantial losses to public revenues. Many question the appropriateness of dedicating resources towards tertiary care facilities while there is a near absence of primary care units, especially in urban areas like Bangalore.
- Regardless of the growing medical tourism industry in Bangalore, a paradox of care remains: Bangalore continues to cater to and dedicate resources towards medical tourism, while simultaneously failing to meet the local health service needs. As such, it is imperative that medical tourists do not benefit at a cost to local patients, and medical tourism should only be viewed as an additional revenue source.

Conclusion

Meditourism is like the icing on the cake. And the icing cannot sit atop the cake unless the cake is well baked. Bangalore should have a better presentation of its hospitals in order to attract more foreign patients. If the government helps in marketing mediotourism, a larger influx can be derived.

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