



RESEARCH ARTICLE

HEALTH TOURISM- INDIAN ADVANTAGE AND THE ROAD AHEAD

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ABSTRACT

The delivery and consumption patterns of healthcare services have undergone a sea change over the past decade. One major change is movement of people across national borders in pursuit of medical treatment and good health. Developing nations including India are moving to the forefront of world health tourism sector. This paper highlights the Indian scenario, advantages and government initiatives regarding the health tourism sector. The work is based on review of literature from various secondary sources.

INTRODUCTION

Health tourism encompasses all forms of preventive, curative and rehabilitative healthcare. Medical tourism and wellness tourism are a part of health tourism. Over the years global healthcare sector has been transforming drastically opening up the floodgates of health tourism industry. Developing countries like India have many advantages that facilitate enormous growth in this industry. Government of India has been taking several initiatives to give impetus to the tourism sector in general and medical tourism in particular. This work has been undertaken to get a holistic view of status of health tourism in India including the government initiatives in this regard. The paper also highlights specific advantages of Indian medical tourism sector. This paper is based on review of extant literature from published scholarly articles, published Press Information Bureau reports, websites, newspaper reports and articles in travel and tourism magazines.

Health tourism

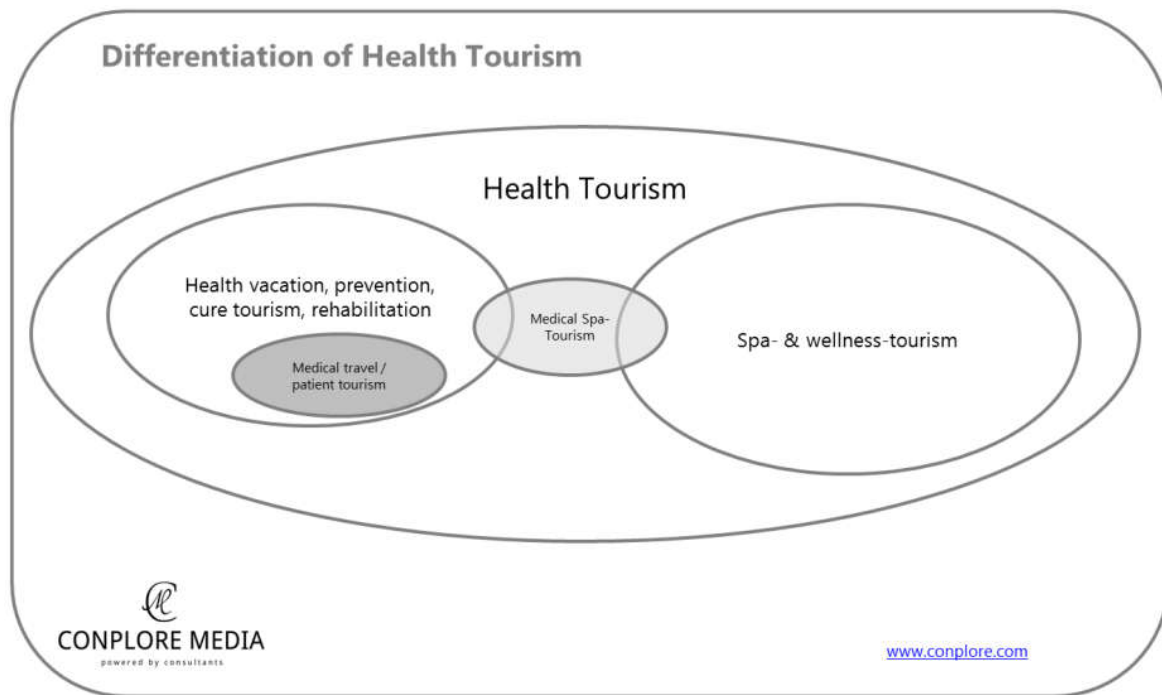
Health tourism is tourists travelling for receiving medical treatment or for improving health or fitness. Health tourists are those who go on a holiday to take advantage of healthcare services. Health tourism is a collective term including various sub-segments of health-related tourism and travel consisting of an entire range of highly differentiated services and products. Conplore magazine has identified health tourism as consisting of the following segments. (Buchholz, 2016)

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Medical tourism (or patient tourism), health vacations, medical cures and spa and wellness tourism are all part of broader concept of Health tourism. Medical tourism is a culture where people travel to overseas countries to obtain healthcare services such as medical, dental and surgical care as well as visit the tourist spots of that country (Connell, 2006). Medical tourism, which includes two sectors - medicine and tourism is travelling with the aim of improving one's health, and also an economic activity that entails trade in services (Bookman, 2007). Wellness tourism is travel for the purpose of promoting health and well-being through physical, psychological, or spiritual activities. While medical tourists generally travel reactively to receive treatment for a diagnosed condition, wellness tourists are proactive in seeking to improve or maintain health and quality of life. Spa is a core business within wellness tourism and accounts for a significant portion of the wellness tourism economy.

The Indian scenario – facts and figures

As per Indian Brand Equity Foundation estimate, overall Indian healthcare market is worth around US\$ 100 billion and is expected to grow to US\$ 280 billion by 2020, a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 22.9 per cent. As per another estimate global medical tourism market is expected to garner \$143.8 billion by 2022, registering a Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 15.7% during the forecast period 2015 - 2022. Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu India has predicted that the Indian healthcare market, which is worth around US\$ 100 billion, will likely grow at a CAGR of 23 per cent to US\$ 280 billion by 2020.



Source: Conplore Media

Figure 1. Types of Health Tourism

Global Spa Summit, 2011 has identified that medical tourism in India primarily involves medical and surgical treatments in hospitals and clinics, but the country also promotes complementary traditional therapies such as Ayurveda. (Katherine Johnston, 2011). The following table shows the number of foreign tourists visiting India for medical treatment from 2012-2014.

Table 1. No of foreign patients travelling to India

Year	No. of foreign patients travelling to India to seek medical treatment
2012	171,021
2013	236,898
2014	184,298

Source: "Promotion of Health Tourism" - Press Information Bureau. Retrieved 28 April 2016

Press Information Bureau dated 5th August 2015

India gets its maximum share of foreign patients from Bangladesh and Afghanistan (34%). This may be due to their geographical proximity with India. Poor healthcare infrastructure is also one of the reasons for citizens of these countries turning to India for treatment. 30% of Indian foreign medical tourist arrivals are from Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Other major sources of patients include Africa and the Middle East, particularly the Persian Gulf countries.

The Indian advantage

India is becoming the sought after destination for medical tourists across the world. While cost is considered as the key decision variable prompting people to seek medical care abroad, research shows that 40% of medical travelers seek advanced technology, while 32% seek better healthcare. Another 15% seek faster medical services while only 9% of travelers seek lower costs as their primary consideration (McKinsey and Company report, May 2008).

When compared to the U.S. cost of surgeries and other medical care are around 30% to 70% lower in countries that are promoting medical tourism. India provides various healthcare services at 20% of the U.S. cost. Complex medical procedures such as face lift, gastric bypass and hip and knee replacement are far more affordable in India even after accounting for the cost of travel and accommodation. Lack of insurance accentuates the cost factor. Unavailability of technology or lack of access to it is another reason for the increasing numbers of medical tourists the world over. In India there are 21 hospitals with state-of-the-art technology catering to the needs of foreign medical tourists and the number is increasing. Emergence of big private hospitals, with over 20 of them even accredited by the international agency - Joint Commission International (JCI) equipped with cutting edge technology give India its competitive advantage over neighboring countries vying to attract world medical tourists. Another major advantage of health tourism in India is processing of medical treatments with no waiting lists and accessibility of skilled and experienced doctors. Doctors in India are well trained and experienced, multi-lingual, with many having undergone professional training in developed countries. Also, a wide range of exceptional medical treatment packages are offered in India at very reasonable prices.

The road ahead

In its expanded scope of e-tourist visas the government of India included short term medical needs. This is expected to give a boost to the medical tourism sector in the country where cost effective treatment is rendered with cutting edge expertise. The Government of India is focusing on development of infrastructure to facilitate growth of medical tourism. Visa restrictions have been waived off on tourist visas of few countries and for tourists from select countries a visa-on-arrival scheme has been introduced which allows foreign nationals to stay in India on medical grounds for up to a month. In order to promote India as a holistic destination for

medical tourists The Ministry of Tourism promotes Wellness and Medical Tourism by running campaigns in the international markets under the Incredible India brand-line, conducting Road Shows, Seminars, participating in major international tourism fairs and exhibitions and also by supporting Events/Seminars/Conferences which focus on wellness and medical tourism. Brochures, CDs, films and other publicity material are also published from time to time for promotion of Medical and Health Tourism. (Ministry of Tourism (GOI), August 2015). The government has set up National Medical and Wellness Tourism Promotion Board, an umbrella organization that governs and promotes Medical and Wellness Tourism in an organized manner. Accordingly the government has introduced Medical Visa and Medical Attendant Visa as separate categories of Visa to facilitate entry of medical tourists in India. This will enable promotion and positioning of India as a competent and credible medical and wellness tourism destination. (Ministry of Tourism(GOI), May 2016). With the objective of promoting India as a *Premier Global Healthcare Destination* the government of India has started an international summit called Advantage Healthcare India. This summit focused on 5Ts namely

- Tradition – promoting AYUSH and wellness industry
- Technology – promoting technologically advanced medical treatment in India
- Tourism – encouraging people to travel to India for medical value reasons
- Talent – showcasing globally renowned Indian talent in healthcare sector
- Trade – creating unique B2B institutionalized linkages. (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, September 2016).

Hospitals, the major players in medical tourism began to administer personalized medical tour packages for tourists at highly affordable prices. The tour planner plans and manages everything right from fixing appointments with concerned specialists to making arrangements for escorting, transportation and accommodation, obtaining medical visa and preparing other required documents. They even make arrangements for sightseeing, local transportation, and shopping, if required by the patient or family members (C Pratap Reddy, October 2014). All these initiatives will elevate India to the top position in the world medical tourism sector.

Conclusion

India attracts over a million patients every year from over 121 countries and can serve millions more who are keen to be treated here. Indian health tourism sector has phenomenal growth potential because of the relative advantages the country has as compared to other developing nations. Government of India has taken up far reaching steps to promote health tourism in India. A more active role of the government as a regulator and facilitator will catapult India to new heights in the world health tourism sector.

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