

MEDICAL TOURISM IN INDIA: A NEW AVENUE

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Abstract

Medical tourism is attracting attention of travelers from all over the globe. It combines a travel at ease and availing medical health care facility at low cost as per traveler's own choice. World class medical health care is available in some of the Asian countries, such as India, Philippines and Singapore etc. Medical tourism has become one of the major industries in recent times. Medical Tourism India (Health Tourism India) is a developing concept whereby people from world over visit India for their medical and relaxation needs. Most common treatments are heart surgery, knee transplant, cosmetic surgery and dental care. The reason India is a favourable destination is because of it's infrastructure and technology in which is in par with developed countries. India has some of the best hospitals and treatment centers in the world with the best facilities.

Keywords: Medical tourism; Public healthcare; foreign patients; Incredible India

1. Introduction:

Medical Tourism in the global context is at the rising trend in the third world because of affordability, cost, facility and expertise of some countries from the first world and also from the third world countries too. Third world countries like Cuba, Argentine, Mexico, Hungary, South Africa, Thailand, Singapore and India are the major players in the world. Developed world look for cost savings for treatment outside the country, developing countries are looking for expertise and the cost factors for considering a neighbouring country. Health tourism, in the Indian context is at par with other industry in the domestic sector.¹ Ten years ago; medical tourism was hardly large enough to be noticed in India. Today more than 250, 000 patients per year visit Singapore alone – nearly half of them from the Middle East. This year approximately half a million foreign patients will travel to India for medical care, where as in 2002 it was only 150,000. In monetary terms experts estimate that medical tourism could bring India as much as \$ 2.2 billion per year by 2012. Argentina, Costa Rica, Cuba, Jamaica, South Africa, Jordan, Malaysia, Hungary, Latvia and Estonia all have broken in to the lucrative market as well, or are trying to do so, and more countries to join this list every year.¹

Medical tourism will be particularly attractive in US, where an estimated 43 million people are without health insurance and 120 million without dental coverage- these numbers that are both likely to grow. India has emerged as a significant destination for treatment and tourism is not a new story. The country offers great value for money in terms of medical treatment for both visitors from developed countries as well as developing countries. India offers treatment at between half and one-third the cost of similar treatments in neighbouring medical tourism hot spots such as Singapore and Thailand. And that is why some intrepid patients started flocking to India almost a decade ago in search of treatment and cure.

2. What is medical tourism?

Tourism is well known term, meant to explore new areas, enjoy leisure time at peace. However, since few years a new term as 'medical tourism' is catching everybody's attention. Medical tourism can be defined as "medical tourism or medical travel, is the act of traveling to other countries to obtain medical, dental and surgical care at ease and with affordability of traveler's choice." The term was initially coined by travel agencies and the media as catch all phrase to describe a

rapidly growing industry, where people travel to other countries to receive medical care.²

3. History of medical tourism:-

The concept of medical tourism is not new one. The first recorded instance of medical tourism dates back to thousands of years, when Greek pilgrims traveled from all over the Mediterranean to the small territory in sardonic gulf called Epiduria. This territory was the sanctuary of the healing god Alkelspios. Epidura became the original travel destination for medical tourism.³

4. Why there is growth in medical tourism?

Medical tourism is not new to country like India. Especially, such centers like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, etc, which are providing good medical care, since very long. People or tourists from various neighbouring countries are frequently visiting our country for available best medical care at affordable cost. However, India is becoming one of the major hubs, for providing medical care to various categories of foreigners, visiting from all over the globe. It is interesting to note that in year 2005 alone, over 1, 50,000 visitors from 55 different countries visited India for various types of treatment.⁴ there is steady rise in number of tourists visiting as patients from Africa, Oman, where there is paucity of medical facilities and expertise. Above all, in some parts of the country world class medical facilities are available at fraction of the cost as compared to other countries. The main aim of medical tourism is to provide, healthcare services outside the home country of the tourist patients. Such services may typically include elective procedures, complex specialized surgeries such as knee, hip replacement, heart surgery, dental procedure and cosmetic surgeries. Apart from this, many foreigners are attracted towards traditional medical system like Ayurvedic and Naturopathy etc. Kerala, or God's Own Country as its corporate slogan goes, has pioneered health and medical tourism in India. They have made a concerted effort to promote health tourism in a big way, which has resulted in a substantial increase of visitor arrivals into the state. Kerala and Ayurveda have virtually become synonymous with each other. However, though Kerala has strongly focussed on Ayurveda and its wide array of treatments

and medications, good facilities are also available in the other traditional forms of medicine as well as in modern medical treatment.⁵

5. Reasons for rise in medical tourism:-

1. Best of the medical facilities and expertise are not available in the parent country of the tourist. This is mostly applicable to the developed and under developed countries.
2. Long waiting list for minor or major medical procedure is maintained in countries like USA, UK, etc.
3. Higher cost of medical care.
4. Improvements in technology and standards of medical care are now available in other countries at low cost.
5. Convenience and speedy availability of medical care as per patient's choice.
6. Hurdles faced by patient regarding medical insurance settlement etc. in western countries (Such as non cover of orthopedic surgery i.e. knee, hip replacement, restrictions on the choice of the facility, surgeon or prosthetics to be used).
7. The ease and affordability of international travel.
8. Efficiency of Indian doctors, supporting staff and personal attention in patient care.

6. Availability of various medical portfolios in India:⁶

According to Medical Tourism Corporation (MTC) network of medical service providers various medical portfolios of medical care are available in India (www.medicaltourismco.com) as:

1. Bariatric Surgery
2. Blood vessel system surgery
3. Cardiology
4. Female reproductive system and pregnancy
5. Fertility
6. General surgery
7. Hair replacement
8. Hernia repair surgery
9. Orthopedics and joint replacements
10. Kidney and urinary system
11. Laparoscopic surgery (minimally invasive)
11. Male reproductive system and urinary tract
12. Neuro surgery and spine procedures
13. Oncology (cancer)
14. Stomach and bowel

7. Present scenario in India:-

Presently health care in western countries has become very much expensive not only for minor surgeries but also for major surgical procedures. Compared to the countries like UK or the US, procedure like heart bypass surgery or angioplasty comes at a fraction of the cost in India, even though the quality of doctors and medical equipment is comparable to the best in the world. This situation in west Asia has changed the total concept of India as one of the best centers providing high quality health care and has become health care industry. Some foreigners visit as first timer or frequently only for surgeries. Some of them come on vacation with major agenda of medical care in their travel plans. Tourists come for orthopedic, ophthalmology, For heart valve replacement surgery, cost would be \$ 200,000 or more in US and that goes for \$ 100,000 in the Philippines and India, which includes round the trip air fare and a brief vacation package. Similarly a metal free dental bridge worth \$ 5,500 in the US and costs \$ 500 in India or Bolivia and only \$ 200 in the Philippines, knee replacement in the Thailand with six days of physical therapy costs about – one fifth of what is would cost in the States. Lasik eye surgery worth \$ 3,700 in the US is available in many other countries for only \$ 730.⁹ Some of the medical centers in the country are well known for specialized procedures like angioplasty, knee replacement, hip resurfacing, rhinoplasty, heart surgery, bone marrow transplant etc. The government and private hospital groups are committed to the goal making India as a world leader in the medical industry at affordable cost. In spite of great availability of skilled professionals, medical care in country is still lagging behind in achieving number one position slot as medical tourism, due to the poor availability of infrastructure and good hotels. These issues are needed to be addressed with top priority to improve present scenario. The greatest asset of the country is its large English speaking population, who can communicate easily with foreigners. From foregoing discussion it is clear that, medical tourism in India has become most preferred destination amongst foreigners, due to availability of all medical facilities at lower cost with world standards as compared with other western countries.¹⁰

reproductive health care, cardiology, urology, cosmetic surgery, dentistry, since medical care and highly skilled, talented professionals are available at affordable cost as compared to their own countries. Especially in Asian countries like Philippines, India, Singapore, Thailand and Honk Kong etc. are becoming major hubs for medical tourism. However, India is emerging as most preferred destination for medical care across the globe. The number of foreign tourists visiting is continually increasing since year 2005.⁷ It is noteworthy to mention a portion of article published in Udaily by University of Delaware “the cost of surgery in Bolivia, Argentina, India, Thailand, Colombia, Philippines or South Africa can be one tenth of what is in the United States or Western Europe and sometimes even less.”⁸

Table -1 show comparative cost amounts for aesthetic procedures in different countries all over the world where India is the most economical with assured quality.

8. Preliminaries required starting a center of excellence for medical tourism:-

- It requires huge financial investment for latest modern set up in medical centre.
- Good infrastructure and availability of convenient transport for tourists
- Up gradation of medical facilities from time to time
- Availability of excellent accommodation facilities
- Cost affordability and Insurance cover
- Highly trained man power
- A good coordination between government policies and medical industry
- Legal protection in medical disputes
- Accreditation of medical facilities by IOS (International Organization of Standardization) and JCI (Joint Commission International), or government regulatory authority like Medical Council of India and Health Ministry of India.
- Hospitals, institutes having availability of all facilities under one roof, such as, various surgical procedures, physiotherapy, dentistry etc.
- A need of proper pricing policy as per accredited medical facilities is must.
- A good marketing strategy is required to promote medical tourism by medical service providers

9. Risks and threats:¹¹

- There must be agencies to check credentials of the medical tourists regarding his/her medical history politico-socio economic background, since India is facing a terrorist threat very often.
- Cheating or exploitation by unauthorized individuals of patents which may send wrong message about medical tourism of the country.
- A proper settlement of insurance coverage of overseas medical treatment.

10. Benefits of medical tourism:-

Development of medical tourism will offer various benefits such as:-

- A good revenue generation for foreign exchange.
- Will generate a good number of employment opportunities for local population.
- India will become one of the important preferred destinations for medical tourism on the world map.
- More foreigners will be attracted for medical tourism.
- Medical professionals will develop a great degree of medical expertise with foreign patients, which will help to establish training centers to train the medical professionals at medical care service providers.
- Pharmaceutical industries will get strong boost in terms of development, research and in revenue earnings.
- Even remote areas of country with good infrastructure can become good centres of medical tourism.

Conclusion:

India is having a large pool of trained medical practitioners, good hospital facilities at lower cost affordability with highly skilled personnel. Medical practitioners are having good competence in their profession as compared with their foreign counterparts. Hence India can become a most preferred destination for medical tourism.

Acknowledgement:

Authors are very much thankful to Dr. K. S. Soodan, Ex-Principal, Rural Medical College, Loni for his valuable guidance.

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Table - 1: Comparative cost amounts for aesthetic procedures in different countries¹²

Surgery	USA	Europe	Argentina	Bolivia	Brazil	Colombia	India
Rhinopalsty	6000	5500 (91.66)	2300 (38.33)	1200 (20)	2100 (35)	2000 (33.33)	1700 (28.33)
Face lift	15000	12500 (83.33)	4300 (28.67)	2600 (17.33)	4500 (30)	4200 (28)	4500 (30)
Breast augmentation	8000	7500 (93.75)	3700 (46.23)	2500 (31.25)	3800 (47.5)	3200 (40)	3900 (48.75)
Breast reduction	9000	8000 (88.89)	3900 (43.33)	2400 (26.67)	3600 (40)	3400 (37.78)	3700 (41.11)
Liposuction	13500	11000 (81.48)	4500 (33.33)	2700 (20)	4700 (34.81)	3800 (28.15)	4800 (35.55)
Gluteal augmentation	9000	9000	4000 (44.44)	3000 (33.33)	4200 (46.66)	3800 (42.22)	4500 (50)

(Figures in parenthesis indicates percentage of comparative cost reduction as compared with US in US \$)