

Benefits of Medical and Dental Tourism – A Review

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I. Introduction

Medical tourism

Medical tourism, alternatively called health tourism and wellness tourism, is a term that has risen from the rapid growth of an industry where people from all around the world are travelling to other countries to obtain medical, dental, and surgical care while at the same time touring, vacationing, and fully experiencing the attractions of the countries that they are visiting. With countries like India, Mexico, Singapore, Brazil, Argentina, Greece, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Peru, Hungary, Israel, Jordan, Lithuania, Malaysia, South Africa, Thailand and the Philippines actively promoting it, the future of medical tourism is sure to be bright.¹

In medical tourism, citizens of highly developed nations avoid services offered in their own communities and travel to other areas of the world for medical care. Medical tourism is fundamentally different from the traditional model of international medical travel where patients generally travel from less developed nations to major medical centers in highly developed countries for medical treatment that is unavailable in their own countries.²

The number of people seeking healthcare in foreign countries now runs in the millions each year. Most patients are Westerners attracted to the concept of quality surgical treatment for a fraction of the cost they would pay in their own countries. After receiving the medical treatment, the patients take a relaxing recovery vacation in the same country. Often patients can pay for their surgery, flight and a week or two at a resort for as little as a quarter of what they would have paid back at home. Occasionally the medical procedure needed is urgent, but more often it is an elective treatment such as cosmetic surgery or dental care.³

Apart from being prohibitively expensive, it is the waiting time that it takes for activities like operations, often ranging from six months to a couple of years or even more, which motivates people to travel to countries like India for medical treatment. Also health insurance schemes do not often cover elective treatments like cosmetic surgery and hence there exists high incentives for people from the rich industrialist countries to travel abroad for the same.

With India reaching nearer to the status of a global health care destination, the revolution is not restricted to elitist hospitals; a range of alternative healthcare service providers like ayurvedic, naturopathic, homeopathic, and yoga establishments too benefit from the big wave.

A destination is a medical tourism destination not just because of the healthcare facility available there, but also because of the additional provision of destination attractions, both natural and cultural, accommodation, and other amenities. In the absence of these additional provisions, patients may still travel to destinations for healthcare, but the phenomenon resulting thus cannot be termed as medical tourism.¹

Dental tourism

Dental tourism is a subcategory of medical tourism where the chief goal of the individual is to seek dental treatment outside their local healthcare delivery system coupled with a vacation. The definition of dental tourism according to the American Dental Association (2008) - Act of traveling to another country for the purpose of obtaining dental treatment.⁴

Dental tourists seek procedures ranging from root canals to dental implants. Of course, relatively inexpensive procedures like simple cleanings or cavity fillings don't usually warrant travelling outside one's home country.

Many insurance packages offered through employers don't offer sufficient coverage for dental work, meaning patients have to pay the bulk (if not all) of their expenses themselves. These costs are often prohibitively expensive.

Recovery time is usually short for dental work, even when the procedure is relatively invasive. For this reason, outpatients can travel to a vacation destination, receive dental treatment and then spend the remainder of their time enjoying a vacation—all for less than the price of receiving dental treatment at home.³

Benefits of medical and dental tourism

1. *Incredible savings for patient*

Also called as medical travel or health tourism, medical tourism have several benefits for the patients seeking medical help with limited budget.¹

Medical and dental tourists come from all over the world, but most are citizens of Western nations such as the United States, Britain, Europe, the Middle East and Japan. The most obvious benefit for medical and dental tourists is the dramatic savings in cost.⁵ A coronary artery bypass at Thailand's Bumrungrad Hospital costs around one-tenth of what it does in the United States. Even procedures such as complex dental works can be done in a fraction of the cost in countries such as Thailand.³

The most important pulling factor for dental tourism is the savings associated with the lower cost of dental services like root canal treatments, veneers, fillings, crowns, dental bridges, dental implants, orthodontic care etc in the destination countries.⁶

Insurance is another factor in the decision to choose a foreign country for a medical procedure. Some orthopaedic operations, especially knee and hip replacements, are often not covered by health insurance. As a result, orthopaedic surgery has emerged as one of the main treatments performed overseas due to the low cost and freedom to choose where to have the surgery performed. People who cannot afford health insurance simply have no choice but to travel abroad for an expensive medical procedure.³

For people who are tight on budget, medical tourism is a sure short way to get access to advanced equipment and facilities along with better personal care. It is much more affordable to avail luxurious hospital stay in foreign hospital than in their own countries.¹

2. *Economic benefits to the country*

Since medical tourism attracts the high-end tourists from developed and developing nations, it gives an economic boost to not only developed countries but also small or deprived regions, which otherwise are rich in traditional methods of health.

The main impact of medical tourism is that it brings direct foreign exchange earnings and contributes greatly to government revenues. It offers employment and business opportunities to the local people. Medical tourism is an enormous source of foreign exchange for destination economies because foreign medical tourists bring in foreign currency to pay for different goods and services they receive during their medical journey.

The fast growth of medical tourism worldwide helps in generating direct or indirect employment to the residential population. Direct employment includes jobs, such as taxi services, hotels, restaurants and sale of memento; on the other hand indirect employment comprises the delivery of goods and different other services required by the wellness tourism industry.

It also contributes to government revenues. Local or state governments not only obtain taxes from people employed in medical tourism industry and through direct charges, green tax or departure duty, on medical tourists, but from various duties on goods and services offered to vacationers as well.

Most of the governments across the world are willing to invest in the development of local infrastructure to attract more foreign medical tourists from developed nations. They need to produce better roads, public transport system, and water and sewage systems to accommodate high-end wellness travelers. Better infrastructure leads to encourage tourism and increases the standard of life of the local residents.

Furthermore, some medical tourism destinations make an impact on foreign travelers and force them to visit the place again or even encourage them to become an enduring resident of that particular region or country, which eventually increases the demand of the accommodation and other essential commodities and thus overall development.⁷

Consequently, it helps in taking pressure off waiting lists and proves to be financially beneficial for health care provider in both countries. This is because most of the time, sending the patient abroad is a more cost efficient than treating them in own country, and the destination country healthcare provider makes profit by the income. Referring patients to international destinations also helps in reducing the financial stress of the healthcare provider.¹

3. *No wait-lists*

The popularity of medical tourism can be directly traced to the incredibly high costs of healthcare and long wait periods for some procedures in many countries.

Another major benefit is the speed at which some surgical procedures can be completed. The waiting period for a hip replacement in Britain, for example, can be up to a year or more. A patient can fly to India, Thailand, Malaysia or the Philippines and have the procedure done almost immediately. Since most of the doctors and surgeons in medical tourism destinations have been well-trained internationally, patients can expect quality healthcare at the reputable institutions.³

Moreover, individuals with nationalized healthcare services, like the UK and Canada, who do not want to wait for medical treatment, are drawn towards health tourism owing to convenience and quick access to healthcare.¹

4. *Excellent quality*

Even though most medical tourists consider lower cost as one of the main benefits of medical tourism, it is not the only factor responsible for its rapidly growing popularity. A major advantage of medical tourism is that the patient can travel to any destination of the world to get the best and most cost effective healthcare and treatment. The biggest benefactors are those patients, who are not able to avail and access specialized procedures, surgeries, doctors and facilities like fertility treatment and alternative therapies, in their home country.

With the escalating competition among healthcare industry in various countries, hospitals and clinics are prompted to raise their quality standards to attract patients, which proves favorable for the local patients consecutively.

Several countries regulate and even ban certain elective procedures or complicated surgeries. It was only recently that US Food and Drug Administration approved the Hip Resurfacing, even though it is known to have a great success rate at many popular medical tourism destinations around the world. Therefore, patients, who do not have access to certain procedures in their country, see medical tourism as a savior as they can travel to any country and opt for the procedure of their choice. In fact, many hospitals specializing in medical tourism are known to offer outstanding quality and services.¹

5. *Access to latest technology*

As the technology developed, doctor training and standards of healthcare in developing countries has vastly improved in recent years, more and more people are looking at medical tourism as an attractive solution to their health problems.³ Easy access to technological and medical facilities, diagnostics, and procedures makes medical tourism all the more useful. Most patients opt for medical tourism for elective procedures as well as complex specialized surgeries such as joint replacement, cardiac surgery, dental surgery, and cosmetic surgeries.¹

6. *Surgeon expertise*

Many of the doctors and surgeons that offer healthcare services to international patients are trained and certified internationally. Medical centers all over the world have acquired accreditation from well known international organizations such as Joint Commission International (JCI), Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) and International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to express their dedication to excellence. Some institutes and medical centers are members of the NIH (National Institutes of Health), which is a federal agency that gives leadership and financial support to researchers in the field of medicine and health.⁸

7. *Personalized service*

Most medical travelers vouch for the genuine and excellent service that they receive from surgeons, nurses and other medical staff. The staff to patient ratio is low making high level of personal care possible.⁵

8. *Great convenience*

Most procedures performed abroad can be scheduled via the internet or by phone. People have the flexibility to book flights and schedule surgery procedures from the comfort of their own home. This eliminates the inconvenience of going to the hospital or clinic for evaluations and assessments. The only time a person has to leave their house is on the day or week of the surgery or procedure.⁸

9. *Travel opportunities*

Another benefit is the pleasure of adding some travel and adventure to the medical needs.⁹ For many medical tourists, a trip to Thailand or India will be a first. A big component of the medical tourism industry is the relaxing vacation period following the medical procedure. Medical tourism destinations promote this aspect just as much as the quality and cost of their healthcare.⁶ For some medical tourists, especially those seeking dental care, cosmetic care or wellness treatments, these can enjoy the opportunity to travel overseas in addition to receiving less expensive healthcare.⁸

In Thailand, patients can lounge on one of the country's many beautiful beaches during their recovery, while India offers some amazing spa resorts where luxury and pampering is the focus. And South Africa even promotes wildlife safaris as part of its medical tourism packages.³

The prospects of combining treatment with holiday for recuperating, is an added bonus for the patients. There can be nothing more pleasurable than recovering in a relaxing and spending time in a beautiful environment, lying on a beach or shopping in luxury boutiques.¹

10. Increasing flow of health information

Besides patients, those involved in medical tourism industry also benefit at large from it, as the healthcare providers, hospitals and doctors can become world class experts in their areas of specializations by having a wider patient base from all over the world, which in turn increases their profitability in the long run. Globalizing the opportunities for healthcare provision, medical tourism also contributes in the increasing flow of health information among doctors worldwide. This way, doctors and healthcare professionals gain knowledge about the latest development in the medical industry all over the world.¹

Who gets benefited?

Medical and dental tourism is an advantage for all those who are a part of the industry be it the patient, doctors, translators or any other service providers. However, the most direct benefits are to the following people:

1. Retirees and pensioners

Government sponsored health care for the ageing section of the society often doesn't cover expensive surgeries and experimental therapies. Older populations generally face chronic healthcare issues like heart diseases, diabetes, kidney diseases etc. Due to prolonged life in the recent years, people are living for greater number of years and this means that death rate is lowered, adding to the population of old.

Medical and dental tourism serves as an affordable option for such patients who are healthy enough to travel. With the easy availability of transportation services like stretchers and wheelchairs at airports, medical travel has granted a new life lease to those affected by their age.⁹

2. Patients traveling for nonessential or cosmetic procedures

Patients from developed western countries often travel to other smaller countries for medical and dental treatment which might not be essential for sustaining life. With the cheaper option of medical and dental tourism, now patients from relatively lower income levels can also indulge in cosmetic vacations abroad.

A majority of these people travel for cosmetic enhancement procedures such as facelift, breast enhancement and reconstructive surgery. With both men and women becoming beauty conscious, cosmetic procedures are on the rise.

Countries such as Brazil, South Korea and Thailand offer cosmetic treatment at up to 60% cheaper rates than US, making it a reason for many people to travel to these countries. 33% medical tourists travel abroad for cosmetic surgery.⁹

3. Citizens of countries with favorable exchange rates

US citizens are at an advantage in medical and dental tourism because of favourable exchange rates. Medical and dental procedures or treatments have always been costly in US which has resulted in the boom of medical and dental tourism industry.

People residing in countries with high per capita income and high gross domestic product benefit immensely from the currency conversion. This is because they can travel to most of the eastern countries for medical and dental treatment as the dollar exchange rate is very favourable which thereby reduces the cost of the treatment considerably. This is in addition to the fact that treatment in Asian countries is already cheaper because of low labour rates.⁹

4. People opting for procedures not approved in home country

Anyone who wants to undergo a procedure or therapy not approved by the healthcare regulating authority in the home country can indulge in medical and dental tourism.

The FDA did not approve stem cell and hip resurfacing apart from advanced technologies for certain vascular diseases, cancer, kidney diseases for a long time in US. While some stem cell treatments have received regulatory approval elsewhere, others have not been demonstrated as safe and effective in clinical trials, let alone been approved for human use by any major Western regulator.

Countries like Spain and Mexico have fertility treatments on the ban list. People who want to receive such treatments often choose medical tourism as a convenient option to get their treatments. Medical tourism allows them to undergo the desired procedure by travelling to countries where the treatment is offered.

Restrictions on the use of certain type of stents, prosthetics and other aids in hospitals in home country also drive patients to go to the best hospital abroad in the field.

Germany, Austria, Ireland, Portugal, etc. provide quality stem cell treatment. India, Mexico and Thailand are the most popular places where one can get fertility treatments in modern facilities. Tunisia, India and Thailand are a few medical tourism destinations which offer hip resurfacing treatments at affordable prices.⁹

5. *The uninsured or underinsured*

Most of the elective procedures are not covered by insurance policies. Elective procedures are scheduled in advance and do not involve medical emergencies.

This includes the masses of uninsured population who have to completely bear treatment costs. It also includes insured people bearing the costs of elective surgeries and 'pre-existing' medical conditions like cancer.

In many countries, medical treatments like laser surgery, breast augmentation and liposuction are not covered under insurance and hence the cost of such treatments is very high. Such uninsured or underinsured patients prefer to undergo treatment in other foreign countries. Medical and dental tourism proves to be an advantageous option as these procedures are performed at a very low cost abroad.⁹

6. *Those seeking alternative medical procedures*

Patients who do not have accessibility to alternative therapies like ayurvedic treatments, homeopathy, naturopathy, and others in the home country can benefit from medical travel.

In most of the developed countries, allopathy is the most preferred type of medical treatment for any illness. Whereas in other developing countries, many types of native treatments such as herbal remedies are still being continued and are given preference for their minimal side effects.

India is a popular destination for ayurvedic, homeopathic and various other forms of treatments. Similarly, Malaysia and Mexico are famous for alternative cancer treatment. Patients who are ready to explore such type of treatments can benefit from medical travel as these alternative procedures have proved to have lesser recovery times. The success rates of these types of alternative therapies for certain illnesses are very convincing.⁹

7. *Patients wanting to keep procedure furtive*

If a patient undergoes a treatment to reshape his/her nose or any cosmetic procedure, he/she may wish to keep their procedure undisclosed.

Medical tourism friendly nations such as Thailand, India, Brazil, etc. offer complete confidentiality and hence attract patients from abroad. Gender reassignment procedure is one such treatment which most patients would want to keep under cover for a certain period of time, till they grow accustomed to the changes in their body.

Distance is a plus point of medical tourism as a foreign state offers complete privacy and the patient can keep the knowledge of undergoing the treatment disclosed.⁹

8. *Patients who want personalized care*

Prolonged treatments cost very high in certain destinations. In contrast, they cost mere fractions at medically friendly nations.

Patients who desire more personalised care and have to undergo long term treatments prefer to undergo medical treatments in developing countries. These locations offer excellent postoperative care, healing sessions, follow a strict, healthy diet and every patient is assisted in all his needs.

Medical tourists from abroad are always treated with utmost care and can enjoy more customised treatment plans for their illness. This is generally because hospitality helps in maintaining the global repute of the hospital.⁹

9. *Those who want to enjoy recreational activities with treatment*

Patients who travel abroad to a different environment can have time off for themselves and their bodies for recovery. The beaches, forests, museums and calm surroundings of some of the popular medical tourism destinations allow patients to recuperate peacefully.

Destinations such as Costa Rica, Brazil, Mexico and Cayman Islands are popular for their postoperative recovery options. Any country which attracts patients from abroad, both for recreational purpose and for medical treatment is always attractive.

Patients looking for long holidays can club their medical and dental treatment together with a vacation as they can cut down on travel costs and also enjoy the culture and beauty of the destination while recuperating.

II. Conclusion

The direct and indirect benefits of medical and dental tourism are too many to count. While patients can benefit immensely from the advanced quality of care and affordable prices, hospitals and, medical and dental tourism destinations can also take advantage of this burgeoning industry.⁹ It also provides an opportunity for regional as well as national economic recovery and growth.⁷ Medical tourism in India has emerged as the fastest growing segment of tourism industry despite the global economic downturn.¹⁰ Many hotels and resorts have already tied-up with some hospitals understanding the potential of business.¹¹ In order to become a highly successful health tourism destination, it requires skilled people along with quality products and services.¹² Some of the medical tourism strategies for further promoting medical tourism in India include building and promoting the image of India as high quality medical tourism destination, creating and promoting new combination of medical tourism products, keeping up the high standard of quality treatments at a reasonable price, providing informative online and offline materials and making them available to the potential customers.¹³

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