

The Business of Dental Tourism: With Special Relevance to India

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Abstract

The definition of dental tourism according to the American Dental Association - Act of traveling to another country for the purpose of obtaining dental treatment. India is becoming the favored destination for dental tourism because of its advanced infrastructure and technology which is in par with the developed countries like USA, UK, Germany etc. It has some of the best treatment centers in the world with world class facilities and is also emerging as one of the most favored tourist destinations in the world. India's USP is, its low cost and well- trained dentists to appeal to the tourists. Even with airfare, the cost of travelling to India in search of dental treatment can be economical, and the quality of services is often better than that found in many developed nations. In fact, many patients are rather pleased at the prospect of seeking dental care in India while holidaying. Indian cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Jaipur, Chandigarh, Kerala and Goa are developing major Dental tourism centres.

Keywords: Dental tourism, medical tourism, cost and benefit ratio, niche market, sunrise industry

Introduction

Dental tourism, a subset of medical tourism, involves individuals seeking dental care outside their country coupled with a vacation. India has become a popular destination for foreign patients in recent times, particularly in dental care. India's accessibility and availability of quality assured and cost-effective dental treatment, amalgamated with its myriad hues of culture and heritage, has exponentially fostered the bloom of India in "dental tourism." High costs, lack of health insurance and dental benefits are key factors pushing low-income western world families to obtain cross-country dental care. Dental Tourism companies and corporate dental chains are increasingly advertising "all inclusive" travel packages that include dental procedures, hotel room reservations, side trips to tourist attractions. Dental tourism is growing very rapidly in developing countries. Many developing countries provide affordable quality dental treatment in very short time to attract more patients. The UK patient gets such treatment in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Poland. American patients obtain such low cost dental care in Argentina, Costa Rica and Peru. The most popular destinations providing affordable dental treatments are: India, Costa Rica, Mexico, Thailand, Philippines, Hungary, Turkey, Czech Republic and Poland. These countries are excelling in dental tourism due to outstanding cost and benefit ratio, dental professionals are well-trained, dental technology, quality of materials and equipment used in dental practices is of international level and patient satisfaction levels are high. India provides state of the art treatment in a cost effective manner and an added advantage is that there is no waiting period for any treatment. Mexico followed by India and Hungary is the leading destination for dental tourism, 25% of the worldwide dental tourists goes to Mexico. Hungary primarily serves the Europeans, while India serves mostly Asian patients, along with some US citizens.

India as a Medical Tourism Destination:

Medical tourism is a growing sector in India. In October 2015, India's medical tourism sector was

estimated to be worth US\$3 billion. It is projected to grow to \$7–8 billion by 2020. 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."

Foreign patients travelling to India to seek medical treatment in 2012, 2013 and 2014 numbered 171,021, 236,898, and 184,298 respectively. Traditionally, the United States and the United Kingdom have been the largest source countries for medical tourism to India. However, according to a CII-Grant Thornton report released in October 2015, Bangladeshis and Afghans accounted for 34% of foreign patients, the maximum share, primarily due to their close proximity with India and poor healthcare infrastructure in their own home nations. Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) accounted for 30% share of foreign medical tourist arrivals. Other major sources of patients include Africa and the Middle East countries. In 2015, India became the top destination for Russians seeking medical treatment, Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and the National Capital Region received the highest number of foreign patients primarily from South Eastern countries. In a recent case: Eman Ahmed Abd El Aty, the nearly 500-kg Egyptian and possibly the world's heaviest woman, successfully underwent a surgery to reduce the size of her stomach at Mumbai's Saifee Hospital through crowd funding. Such kind of successful cases puts India under a global limelight and also help India in growing its soft power.

Business opportunities in Dental and Medical Tourism:

Flowchart depicting various intermediaries involved in Dental Tourism

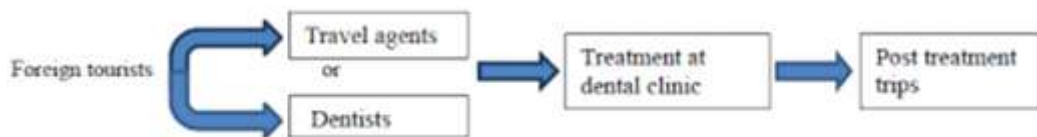


Figure 1. Flow chart of dental tourism.

Dental tourism is a booming industrial segment where lies abundant fortunes, it is time now to think about the entrepreneurial possibilities. The most encouraging thing for any entrepreneur who wishes to start a venture associated with dental and Medical tourism is that the scale and scope for businesses here that can be conceived off are diverse. Some of the opportunities are listed below:

Specialized Travel Intermediation Services: Medical tourists constitute a niche market with uniquely defined profiles and hence there exists abundant scope for dedicated travel agents and tour operators. The intermediary should try to do a detailed market research on the medical tourist segments patronizing a particular destination country and conceive, design, develop, and sell products and services that best cater to the needs of those segments. For instance, chartering special flights for patients seeking to visit particular destinations; providing pre-consultation services like taking appointments with the doctors; registering at the hospital; visa-foreign exchange assistance; help with guides and language translators; room booking at adjacent hotels for the accompanying persons; arranging local sight-seeing excursions; giving special provisions for the needy like wheelchairs; providing health catering services; etc. can be

done by the intermediary.

Travel Desk in Hospitals: Hospitals that want to sell medical tourism services should have a dedicated travel desk in the hospitals. Such a travel desk should act as a comprehensive marketing arm of the hospital w.r.t medical tourism. It shall coordinate the in-house services as well as services provided by other players like local tour operators. It can also think of providing services like ticketing, visa-extension assistance, foreign exchange, etc.

Staff Trainers: Medical tourists expect top-class hospitality from the hospital service staff. Providing customer relationship-training inputs for doctors, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, and hospital front office staff is vital in this regard. For this, the trainers have to first identify the factors that generate patient satisfaction and loyalty and the corresponding behaviors of the service staff. Then, suitable employee training programs and management development programs can be designed, developed, and delivered.

Medical Tourist Management Software Developers: If one has the competence in software development and sufficient domain expertise in medical tourism (or, if both of these can be harnessed from external individuals or firms), there exists demand for customized software solutions. Software can be for online booking, for automating the hospital administration, etc.

Medical Tourism Consultants: Medical tourism is a sunrise sector where many problems are not well defined and answers not readily available. Thus, there requires trouble-shooters and one who has creative insights and academic training with ample exposure to the industry can excel in the role of a consultant.

Alternative Medical Care/Rejuvenation Centres: India which has for so long been known to the world for its wide range of alternative therapies like Ayurveda, Yunani, Siddha, Rekki etc there exists abundant scope in promoting the same. Ayurvedic health centres spread across the country are among the first to capitalize upon this unmet demand. It requires relatively less expenditure to start an alternative health centre for Ayurveda, Homoeopathy, Yunani, Siddha, etc. With government help through dedicated AYUSH ministry there lies a huge potential in this segment.

Medical tourism brokers: Across the world, demand for private health care has created a cottage industry of sorts for medical brokers, who specialize in helping patients jump the queue by negotiating reduced rates for elective surgeries such as Dental Implants, Smile designing, knee and hip replacement. They get a big commission, which they partially pass on, to the customer who is also benefited thus.

SWOT Analysis of Dental tourism in India:

Strengths

- Access to quality dental care at reasonable cost: India with its large pool of highly qualified, skilled dental professionals is a hub for multitude of dental services. The quality dental services can be available at 1/10th of the cost of services in western world. Following chart depicts Dental Implant cost by country.
- Language: It is due to widely English speaking doctors.
- Less waiting time: Travel agents or dentists themselves could fix prior appointments for tourists according to their tour resulting in less waiting time.
- Improved sterilization techniques: The sterilization protocol followed in India is in par with the international standards and thus resulting in carrying out all dental treatments in a complete hygienic environment.

Dental Implant Cost by Country	
United States	\$4000
UK	\$3500
Spain	\$2750
Italy	\$1800
Mexico	\$1600
Lithuania	\$1400
Romania	\$1250
Costa Rica	\$1000
Ecuador	\$1000
Turkey	\$1000
Hungary	\$900
Thailand	\$900
India	\$850
Croatia	\$850

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- Lower Medication cost: The cost of medicines in India is less due to strong pharma sector which is gaining world recognition. There is strong recommendation for 'generic' drug production in order to bring down the costs.
- Low labour cost: The amount spent on procuring the paramedics and other secretarial staff is less due to readily available manpower at a low cost.
- Tourist interest: The tourists get attracted to its 500 years old civilization. India's heritage, cultural and religious diversity could be one of the pulling forces for the tourists.
- Alternative medical proposition: India is a hub for its ancient stream of medicines. The alternative methods of medicine such as Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Yoga, Tibetan Sowa- Rigpa and Acupuncture are gaining public acceptance in modern India.

Weakness

- No strong government support / initiative to promote medical tourism
- Low Coordination among the various service providers in the industry– airline, hotels, travel agents and hospitals

- Unhygienic country as per Perception of the Customer and The most common myth is that inexpensive cross-border dental care may be substandard.
- No mandatory accreditation and regulation system for hospitals
- Very few JCI accredited and NABH accredited hospital in India
- Lack of uniform pricing policies

Opportunities

- Increased demand for healthcare services from countries like US, UK with aging population
- Stable and favorable political environment “Make in India” policy – Slogan coined by our prime minister, Mr. Narendra Modi. To attract business around the world to invest and manufacture in India. The application if implemented successfully cut down the prices of dental materials and equipment, and there would be no extra charges for import and export
- Fast-paced & stressful lifestyle increases demand for wellness tourism and alternative cures
- Deficiency of supply in National Health Systems in countries like U.K, Canada
- Demand from countries with underdeveloped healthcare facilities
- Insurance companies in western countries are offering full cover and care in home country at a higher premium payment. Insurance companies are offering packages where customers can choose a lower premium but will have to get them treated at hospitals with comparable quality out- side the country, with which they have tie-ups.

Threats

- Strong and stiff competition from asian countries like Thailand, Singapore, Philippines
- Lack of international accreditation
- Overseas medical care not covered by insurance providers
- Low-investment in health infrastructure
- General infrastructure is not impressive

Way forward

After conducting the SWOT Analysis of Dental Tourism in India, below are the few areas of improvement suggested which will enable Indian medical tourism to compete successfully.

1. Engineer an image revolution: The government, the healthcare, and the travel industry has to work together in harmony to change the predominant image in the minds of the average public in the medical tourist originating countries that India is a country where medieval technologies are still being employed, it is unsafe to travel in India, doctors are not trained properly, unwelcome local attitude, poor hygiene, poor communication and transportation infrastructure, etc.

2. Raise the quality standards: While perception change-over can be achieved by the effective use of advertising and other promotional tools, one cannot hide for ever the problems that really exist. It is high time hospitals in India benchmark themselves up for international quality accreditation standards. Healthcare is a credence service wherein the customer cannot judge the service quality, because of which he looks for cues like the seals of approval of internationally recognized quality control agencies.

3. Simplify the procedures: Many procedures that are being done manually as of now can be simplified,

standardized, and automated. If the information system that an Indian hospital designs is interoperable with similar systems in the West, electronic transferability of data like past medical records of a patient can be done fast. Sometimes, it takes even hours for a patient to register himself and more so to complete the formalities before getting discharged. Easing the travel formalities, This issue has been highlighted by the industry for so long as the severest pricking thorn in cross-border travel. The potential harm of easing international travel related procedures for the medical tourist segment is relatively less and the government should take a proactive attitude in this regard. A special medical tourist visa may be mooted of.

5. Provide quick legal remedies: The Indian legal infrastructure is not at all geared up to handle healthcare specific litigations in a speedy manner. Internationally, legal redressal is a routine affair, which, in India, is not common. Though there exists a mechanism to deal with medical insurance related cases, the redressal is so much time consuming, often extending to a few years.

6. Participating in Wellness and Medical Tourism Fairs / Wellness and Medical Shows / Wellness and Medical Promotional Events abroad to showcase the world that we are ready to cater their needs.

7. Holistic Approach to Treatment: Integration of ancient healing traditions with the latest in modern medicine, wherever admissible

8. Learning from Best Practices followed: This is in line to Think globally and act locally. For Eg, In view of the inability for kith and kin to visit an international patient admitted in India, Apollo has introduced a scheme termed as Virtual Patient Visit. This offers the friends and relatives opportunity to gather frequently updated information about treatment progress, the consultant's opinion about the patient, patient's remark, and a multi-media rich medium to convey the messages to and fro both the sides

Conclusion

With the emergence of various tourisms, dental tourism is the one which has identified the dental needs of many tourists worldwide. Initially it was not organized like business and it just started as a personal experience but now-a-days it has gained popularity. Through the current knowledge on dental tourism shows that there is still need for improvement in this field as there is negligible information on the background of patients and the numbers of patients travelling abroad for treatment. Yet when we have a look at Dental tourism market in Thailand, Mexico and Hungary we find they have much more developed market than that of ours. Time has come to replicate and boost wellness tourism in India.

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