

What Makes a Successful Medical Tourism Destination?

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Abstract: Medical tourism or health tourism in the last two decades has been identified as a formal industry. Carrera and Bridges (2006) define medical tourism as "the organized travel outside one's natural healthcare jurisdiction for the enhancement or restoration of the individual's health through medical intervention". About 7 million people travel abroad each year seeking everything from dental work to weight-loss surgery to cancer treatment. That's fueling an industry worth as much as \$40 billion, according to Patients Beyond Borders, a publisher of international medical travel guidebooks. Top eight destinations of medical tourism in terms of number of medical tourists' visits include Thailand, Mexico, United States, Singapore, India, Brazil, Turkey and Taiwan in that order. Countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are considered as regional hub for medical tourism. Many destinations in the world are thriving to attract medical tourists and ripe benefits from this market. So what makes a successful medical tourism destination? Medical tourism industry though a niche market has evolved due to characteristics in the three related industries i.e the healthcare industry, tourism industry and insurance industry and the role of government in promoting, regulating and developing these three industries. Looking at those needs of the patients choosing to undertake medical procedures abroad, a model is developed which will help to test whether a particular country can become a medical tourism destination or not. The model consists of eleven characteristics in healthcare industry, nine characteristics in tourism industry, two characteristics in insurance industry and three major support roles from the Government to make a country a preferred medical tourism destination.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is important to begin by defining what is meant by medical tourism. Medical tourism is defined as, when consumers elect to travel across international border with the intention of receiving some form of medical treatment. This treatment may span the full range of medical services, but most commonly includes dental care, cosmetic surgery, elective surgery, and fertility treatment(1). Although, no agreed definition of medical tourism exist; as a result methods applied by countries vary substantially. Some countries count foreign patients'

visits to hospitals whereas others count the entry of individual patients into the country. Other countries record nationality but not place of residence of patients can be problematic when migrants return to home country for treatments with the intention of receiving some form of medical treatment(2).

The history of medical tourism dates back to its first recorded case when Greek pilgrims traveled from the Mediterranean to Epidauria, a small territory in the Saronic Gulf. It was said that this small territory was the sanctuary of Asklepios, known as the healing God. Thus, it was recorded in medical tourism history that Epidauria is the original destination for medical tourism.(3). There were days, when people use to travel from less developed nations to developed nations for advanced medical treatment. It is only in the last two decades, that patients from the developed nations have been travelling to nations like Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, India, South Africa and Mexico for medical treatment. The reason for such a travel include the costly treatment in the home country, quality of service, quality of paramedical and medical staff, availability of treatment and country as a tourist destination (4).

Statistics show that in 2013, around 900,000 Americans traveled overseas for treatment, according to Patients Beyond Borders, a provider of medical travel information. However, health tourism is not the preserve of Americans — around 8 million patients from across the world seek overseas treatment each year, contributing to a global industry worth \$24-\$40 billion, says Patients Beyond Borders (5). But, is this industry showing a growth trend in all the nations? A report by Ian Youngman, states that there is growth, but some countries are increasing business, others are static and others are seeing less business. It is very much a regional business, and there is a huge move away from price competition to competition on quality, niches and even luxury. Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea are examples where government support has proved very successful at increasing business year on year, while places like India where governments have done little have seen numbers fall. The global price driven model is replaced by a regional one based on culture, quality, and availability (6).

So what makes a successful medical tourism destination? This article presents a model, which acts as a ready reckoner for the country to be and maintain itself as a medical tourism destination. The checklist of the model is mentioned below:

Table 1: A model describing characteristics to become a preferred medical tourism destination

Sr. No	Characteristics	Yes/No
1	Healthcare related characteristics	
1.1	Low cost of treatment	
1.2	Variety of medical treatment offerings	
1.3	Availability of highly trained and experience doctors	
1.4	Availability of highly trained and experienced nurse	
1.5	Hospitality and friendliness of hospital staff, including doctors	
1.6	Hospital Accreditation system	
1.7	Availability of English and other language speaking staff	
1.8	Availability of medical, paramedical, technological and support services suited for medical tourist standards	
1.9	Amount of research, development and innovation in the field of medicine	
1.10	Management of medical emergencies	
1.11	Patient privacy policy	
2	Tourism related characteristics	
2.1	Overall country image	
2.2	Tourism infrastructure and attraction	
2.3	Organized medical tourism travel agents	
2.4	Travel agents operating as healthcare facilitators	
2.5	Air connectivity with other countries	
2.6	Geographic location of the host country	
2.7	Climate condition at the host country	
2.8	Safety and sanitation	
2.9	Political stability	
3	Insurance related characteristics	
3.1	Cross country insurance packages	
3.2	Tie-ups with the hospitals	
4	Role of Government	
4.1	In promotion of country as tourists destination	
4.2	In policy framing regarding medico-legal problems	
4.3	Low entry barriers in terms of visa formalities	

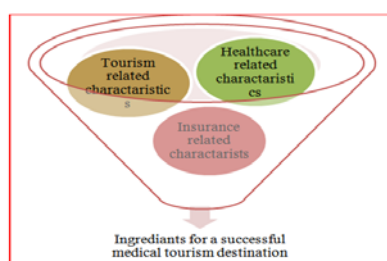


Fig. 1: Graphical representation for becoming a successful medical tourism destination

As seen from the above table and Fig. 1, a country should have various characteristics in healthcare, tourism and insurance industries and role of government in developing and promoting medical tourism. The above model consists of three columns. In the second columns characteristics for each industry is mentioned and in the third column, the country details has to be entered. The country details will be entered in either yes or no against each characteristic. If there are maximum yes, there are high chances for a country to become a successful medical tourism destination. If there are more 'No' than 'yes', then, the country has to work on each such 'no' to become a medical tourism destination.

This model can be applied for all those nations who have lost medical tourists due to any of the above mentioned characteristics or do not have any of the above characteristics. It becomes very difficult for a country to become a preferred medical tourism destination, if the Government is less enthusiastic about such a limitation.

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