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Issues, Prospects, Opportunities and Challenges of Health Tourism in India

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ABSTRACT

Generally, people living in one country, if travel to another country or another region of the same country, for the purpose of getting medical care including surgery, which is not available in their own country or region otherwise, is termed as Medical Tourism or Health Tourism. For this purpose generally people travel from under developed countries to highly developed countries in absence of the facilities in their own country or when getting cheaper and better options in alternative countries. Its popularity is growing fast across the globe, focusing primarily and predominantly on biomedical reasons, combined with tourism, if possible. Most of the medical tourists belong to Asian countries, and interestingly these tourists are visiting also to Asian countries, whose number is increasing very fast every year. In this field mainly four Asian countries India, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia are leading and these are promoting and popularizing medical tourism aggressively. India has great prospects in the field of Medical Tourism by virtue of its competence developed in cardiovascular surgery and organ transplant/surgery, along with low cost option and great reputation. Apart from generating employment opportunities, it will also increase our foreign exchange and socio-economic development, strengthening our country's economy. Apart from the treatment by the allopathic system, other Indian systems of medicines, i.e. Ayurveda, Yoga, Panchakarma, Rejuvenation Therapy and Naturopathy, also have gained great popularity in recent past. The Govt also has taken several initiatives through Ministry of Tourism to promote India as a Medical and Health Tourism Destination. Special provisions have been made for foreign visitors coming to India for their treatment, issuing them a category of visa "Medical Visa" for the purpose. Apart from the Government initiatives, most of the private hospitals are investing heavily, giving a facelift to their medical facilities, realizing the potential for Medical Tourism in India, in order to make them visible to not only to local elite but also to overseas clients. This paper reviews some key aspects, prospects, opportunities, challenges and some other relevant aspects of Medical Tourism with respect to India.

Keywords: Challenges of Health Tourism: Opportunities in Tourism: Tourism in India.

1.0 Introduction

Globalization has promoted interactions among people of different countries, following which many more areas have emerged as possibilities from some business opportunities point of view. One such fast emerging area is Medical Tourism which is a new form of a tourism market which has grown rapidly in the recent years. Traveling to other countries for getting the medical and surgical care called Medical tourism. Several other ways also, Medical Tourism has been defined by Experts in several ways. The term of Medical Tourism got coined and established as travel from home to other destination to improve one's health condition as one type of leisure [1]. Medical tourism is the attempt to attract tourists by deliberately promoting its health-care services and facilities, in addition to its regular tourist amenities [2]. Also this

includes getting indigenous alternative medical services, and any other form of tourism undertaken with the purpose of addressing a health concern. Medical tourism has been also described as popular mass culture, in which people travel to other countries to get healthcare services and facilities along with the opportunity of visiting tourist spots of the country [3].

According to GATS (General Agreement on Trade and Services), medical tourism is the second mode of trade in health services, in which the patients leave their home country for acquiring health care services with high quality and affordable prices [4]. In this respect if we see the Indian context, the Medical treatment in India is very cost effective. In recent past it has been seen that patients from developed countries like, USA, UK, and other countries in a maximum number are coming to India for their treatment.

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As a part of medical tourism, India is recognized as the cradle for test tube babies and is popular for surrogacy services [5]

2.0 Domains of Medical Tourism:

There is a diverse variety of medical services which has been favorite to the visitors coming to India for Medical Tourism. The medical services preferred by the visitors may be classified into following types.

2.1 Wellness tourism

Wellness Tourism is travel for the purpose of improving health and promoting the feeling of well-being through some kind of psychological and spiritual activities. The medical tourists of this category are proactive toward improving or maintaining health and quality of life, and they often focus on prevention.

Wellness tourists opt for diverse services, like pursuing physical fitness, relaxation, stress relieving, meditation, yoga, healthy diet and weight management etc.

2.2 Alternative systems of medicine

There is a parallel system, which has been used for treatment purpose since hundreds of years. National Rural Health Mission, the health project of Government of India, from its inception, has underlined an important role for alternative systems of health care.

In March, 1995 the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare created the Department of Indian Systems of Medicine and Homoeopathy (ISM&H), which was re-named as Department of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) in November, 2003. There is a number of ailments e.g. Arthritis and Rheumatism etc which can be better treated by these alternative systems of medicines.

2.3 Cosmetic surgery

Indian hospitals have developed expertise in performing all kinds of cosmetic surgeries, whose results are very encouraging and these are quite comparable with those of western hospitals. Out of these surgeries the plastic surgery or reconstructive surgery improves the facial look (blepharoplasty) or it renders a confident look through nose surgery called Rhinoplasty.

The weight reduction surgery (liposuction), gastric bypass & gastric sleeve surgeries, Abdominoplasty (tummy tuck) and flap reducing surgery are some of the most commonly performed surgeries. They could become possible because of the experience of medical professionals along with the help of

the latest medical technology. Further, there has been increasing demand for breast augmentation, breast reduction and breast implants etc.

2.4 Advanced and life saving healthcare open transplants

Sometimes this kind of situation also arises when a medical treatment looks futile as it is not likely to give a positive response, depending on the body's condition because of physiological reasons. But even people involved do not want to lose hope and want to make an extra effort.

Under such situations sometimes a miracle kind of things take place as the patient responds positively to the treatment and at times even it proves to be successful too.

That's why sometimes people want to take a chance under such situations, which may be falling in the categories of cardiovascular surgery, chronic Eye ailment, Hip Replacement and in vitro fertilization.

3.0 Socio Political Realities and Government Support

It was part of the basic commitment of the Indian government to provide basic healthcare to its citizens, irrespective of their socio-economic status up to some extent after independence.

But on the advent of globalization and liberalization Indian policies also got changed and the government of India allowed voluntary and private parties to operate with their medical services for the foreign tourists as well as other citizens who can afford the expensive medical facilities. Following this lot many transformations took place in policies, planning and preparations.

It was done through offering subsidies in form of cash and providing concessions in equipment and drug import, placing these agencies/institutions on government panels and providing trained and expert medical professionals.

In Indian context the estimate made on a literature review of healthcare business, policies and some academic papers, forecasting proved to be right and the business of the Medical Tourism in India touched a new height.

Looking into the national prospects a new Legislative National Health Bill, Govt. of India 2009 was proposed to replace the provisioning obligations of the state, which clearly stated in the National Health Policy of 2002, Govt. of India 2002, by free access to healthcare "by any healthcare service providers, be it public or private" (Govt. of India 2009:13).

This way not only legal provisions were made for public private partnership and medical tourism but also promises huge additional subsidies to the latter through third party payments.

4.0 Medical Resources of India

India has been fortunate in having rich heritage of Medical facilities and resources. India is having very good infrastructure for producing trained and expert Medical professionals. There is series of good hospitals, medical research institutes and major service providers in this sector. However, with respect to Medical Tourism in India those hospitals which has emerged as favorite destinations may be named as mentioned below. Metro cities of Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai have been obvious places of choice on these places medical facilities have developed intensively and so these places cater to the maximum number of health tourists. Other hospitals like Medanta, Apollo, Escorts, Max, Fortis, Breach Candy, Hinduja, Asian Heart Institute of Mumbai and AIIMS are also popular for Medical tourism.

5.0 Scope of Medical Tourism in India

Medical tourism in India has great prospects. Because of its favorable conditions the medical tourism industry in India has grown to multi billion dollar industry in a short span. Offering cheaper and reliable medical option, India has attracted millions of foreigners and natives to visit this incredible heritage of the country and also enjoying the medicinal advantages of traditional as well as contemporary medical practices. India is having good number of well qualified, trained and experienced medical professionals. Most of them have acquired their professional qualification from reputed institutes/universities and are having experience from good workplace. Medical professionals in our country are very competent and expert, which is having potential of making India a very fast growing place in this sector. Although the business share of India in international market is not much but as Medical tourism in our country is growing fast, India will be soon a major destination on the world map of Medical tourism.

6.0 Conclusion

The sector of Medical Tourism has emerged as one of the fastest growing industry in recent past. However, Asian region has found many more suitabilities in this sector. Within Asia, India has become a prominent destination for global medical tourists, by offering the reliable Medical services at very low prices, owing to development achieved in Medical field. It is because of the level of confidence developed by India, the patient from the developed countries like USA and UK are coming to India more frequently to find it as an alternative and cost effective destinations.

The government also has taken initiatives to support the sector, facilitating the private investment in healthcare and acting as a regulator. That's why India is in advantageous position of tapping the global opportunities in the medical tourism sector. Some more provisions of incentives to the service providers and reducing import duty on medical equipment would further strengthen medical in India. Also, in order to make the Medical Tourism more effective some coordination mechanism has to be evolved between tourism, health, information, communication and transport departments. Although by virtue of its own salient features the Indian medical tourism industry has emerged with significance, but it is still at a growing stage and has great potential and prospects for future growth and development.

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