

## Medical tourism gaining grounds in India: present scenario and way forward

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Medical tourism (also called medical travel, health tourism or global health care) is a term used to describe the rapidly-growing practice of travelling across international borders to seek healthcare services [1]. 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 travelled 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 [2].

**Keywords:** Medical tourism, international borders, healthcare services

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Sir,

Medical tourism (also called medical travel, health tourism or global health care) is a term used to describe the rapidly-growing practice of travelling across international borders to seek healthcare services [1]. 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 travelled 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 [2].

In late 2002, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) did a study on the medical tourism in collaboration with international management consultants, McKinsey & Company, which showed the immense potential of this sector and thus, was taken up Ministry of Tourism [3]. It is one of the fastest growing industries in the world today. It 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].

Box 1.1 lists the various reasons why it is important for a country like India to focus on this industry and make the most out of it.

- Box 1.1: Why Medical Tourism?**
1. Boost to health economy.
  2. Revenue for the tourism industry.
  3. Growing foreign exchange.
  4. Generate employment opportunities.
  5. Overall development of the country: Technological advancement, medical infrastructure, roads and transport, health care facilities, tourist places.
  6. Good reputation outside country.
  7. Better retention of medical professionals in the country.
  8. Improvement in public health facilities with increased revenue

**Trends in medical tourism industry – tourist arrivals, popular services, foreign exchange earnings:**

India is emerging as one of the most credible destinations for medical tourism. The industry which includes health, wellness and medical tourism is currently a \$3 billion industry. With general tourism on the rise and better policies on cards, it is estimated to reach around \$9 billion by 2020. Global market is estimated to be around \$40-60 billion. India’s foreign exchange earnings from this industry is more than \$1.8 billion. [4] Therefore, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that future of India’s economy and healthcare will largely be influenced by Health care Tourism. Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTA) to India is increasing per year and with it the medical tourists’ arrival is also growing by 30 % annually. Medical tourists comprise of 2-3% of FTA [5]. India hosts more than 1.27 million tourists from US, UK, Canada, GCC countries and neighboring countries like China, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka [6-7]. It features among the top 10 countries for medical tourism, attracting a huge number of people from across the globe for medical, dental and surgical care, and visit the tourist attractions at the same time. Sought after medical services include, eye surgeries, spine surgeries, bone and joints treatments, cosmetic treatments and surgeries, cardiac and GI treatments, dental treatments, infertility treatments. Traditional methods like Meditation and Yoga, Ayurveda, Music Therapy, Homeopathy, Aroma Therapy, Naturopathy, Pranic Healing, Reiki are also popular [3,8]. At present, major groups which are a part of this industry are: Apollo, Tata, Fortis, Wockhard and Max hospitals which cater to the needs and services of a new league of ‘tourists’ from abroad. Most of these hospitals have world class infrastructure and are JCI accredited to meet the quality standards for the foreign tourists. India has a total of 22 JCI accredited hospitals [6].

**SWOT analysis of Medical Tourism in India:**

[4,9] The growing potential of this industry demands assessment of the current strengths, identifying weaknesses, envisioning opportunities and discovering threats. (Box 1.2)

Box 1.2: SWOT analysis of Medical Tourism in India	
<p><b>Strengths -</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Quality Hospitals and doctors</li> <li>✓ Widely spoken English language</li> <li>✓ Lucid information on medical tourism web portals</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weakness -</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Lack of necessary tools to impress patients looking abroad for health care</li> <li>✓ Growing inequalities between government and private hospitals</li> <li>✓ Patient doctor relationship compromised due to commercialisation</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ International accreditation of hospitals and clinical laboratories(JCI)</li> <li>✓ Low cost</li> <li>✓ Less waiting time</li> <li>✓ Post treatment stay in good resorts and easy follow up</li> <li>✓ Publicity campaigns 'Incredible India', 'Atithidevobhava' and 'Make in India'</li> <li>✓ Benefit to travel and hotel industries</li> <li>✓ Medical M- Visa on arrival for 180 countries</li> <li>✓ Alternative medicine</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Quality of post-operative care compromised in procedures requiring long follow-ups</li> <li>✓ Effect of long distance travelling on health after surgeries</li> <li>✓ Vacation activities interfering with healing process</li> <li>✓ Disintegrated package of services covered by insuranceM</li> <li>✓ Inconsistent fee structure, lack of transparent policies</li> <li>✓ Inadequate infrastructure, power supply to hospitals</li> <li>✓ Increase medical costs of local people</li> <li>✓ Medical malpractice- legal remedies?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities -</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Economics of medical tourism</li> <li>✓ Financial support for marketing and publicity of industry</li> <li>✓ New employment opportunities: labour intensive industry</li> <li>✓ Wellness and tourism promotive shows</li> <li>✓ Capacity building of key operators</li> <li>✓ Redressal of Medico legal cases</li> <li>✓ Health/ Wellness tourism leveraging AYUSH</li> <li>✓ Promotion of PPP model</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats -</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Introduction of newer exotic infections in the country</li> <li>✓ Risk of tourists acquiring locally endemic infections</li> <li>✓ Strong Competitors like Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore</li> <li>✓ Illegal purchase of organs and tissues for transplantation</li> <li>✓ Rise in fraud and illegal procedures</li> <li>✓ 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</li> </ul>

**India's standing among the currently popular medical tourism destinations-**India currently ranks 5th on the Medical Tourism Index (2015) globally and 2nd in Asia as per the International Healthcare and Research Centre statistics [10].

Initiatives have been taken up by the government and other key players to make India a hub of medical tourism.

Key factors which have worked in favor of India are: Cheap international travel, growing market of insurance and pharmaceutical industry and quality health care at a cheaper price [2,3,7].

The procedures such as cardiac (heart) bypass, hip and Knee replacements, cosmetic surgeries, gastric bypass etc. cost way lesser (less than one third) in best hospitals in India than their native countries.

Added advantage in India is the widely spoken English language. Another attraction in India is the AYUSH: Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, Homeopathy and acupuncture which is popular in the foreign countries. Joint efforts of the Ministry of Health, External Affairs, Tourism and culture has resulted in the government providing online visas, multiple entries, extensions of stay, and accreditation to more hospitals.

Efforts have been made to make the airports in India hassle free for tourists on medical visa and better road connectivity.

The scope of e-tourist visa has been expanded to include short- term medical treatment.

Separate immigration counters and facilitation desks are in pipeline in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad [7]. Many state governments- Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat promote medical tourism by various policies and recognizing this as an industry so it can avail benefits as other industries. Many health care centres and state governments are participating in international expos and fairs to promote this sector [1].

Despite the above, India is facing great competition from Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The government as well as the other players has shown significant commitment towards improving the scenario in India to boost this industry but the efforts are fragmented and lack good convergence mechanism.

It is needed to convert these commitments and efforts into actions. 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 [9].

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