

Benefits and Challenges of Medical Tourism

Medical tourism is not a new concept and is in practice since decades. It is generally referred to the increasing practice of travelling overseas to get health care. 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. Also called as medical travel or health tourism, medical tourism have several benefits for the patients seeking medical help with limited budget. Easy access to state-of-the-art technological and medical facilities, diagnostics, and procedures makes medical tourism all the more useful.

BENEFITS OF MEDICAL TOURISM:

Even though most medical tourists consider lower cost as one of the main benefits of medical tourism, but 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.

Moreover, individuals with nationalized healthcare services, like the UK and Canada, who don't want to wait for medical treatment, are drawn towards health tourism owing to convenience and quick access to healthcare. 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 beautiful environment, lying on a beach, or shopping in luxury boutiques.

Besides patients, those involved in medical tourism industry also benefit at-large from it, as the health care providers/hospitals/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 health care provision, medical tourism also contributes in the increasing flow of health information among doctors worldwide. This way, doctors and health care professionals gain knowledge about the latest development in the medical industry all over the world.

With the foray of medical tourists, the local economy patients as well as their companions, who spend money overseas, are at advantage. People who are situated within the European Union can easily travel anywhere within the EU for treatment. 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. For instance, a US health insurance company is more likely to prefer sending patients abroad for cheaper treatment.

Several countries regulate and even ban certain elective procedures or complicated surgeries. For example, 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.

If you are tight on budget, then medical tourism is a sure shot 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 the United States. In fact, many hospitals specializing in medical tourism are known to offer outstanding quality and services.

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. Even though the quality standard may vary from country to country, which leaves many potential medical tourists in a dilemma, International accreditation of hospitals and clinics can restore the confidence of patients in this amazing option.

CHALLENGES OF MEDICAL TOURISM:

Even though there are numerous benefits and opportunities provided by medical tourism, potential medical tourists who are looking forward to profit from these benefits, should also be aware of the challenges. Authorization and various quality measures differ widely across the globe that may turn out to be risky and even dangerous for medical tourists to contemplate, making medical tourism a challenging method.

Most patients face major difficulty in getting access to authentic information while researching about various treatment options. Language issues and other communication problems among patients and medical tourism providers also act as a major impediment in getting the correct information. This is also the case when the patients do not ask the right questions to clear their doubts and the health care service providers also fails to provide the right information to potential medical tourists.

Another problem faced by patients is the lack of recourse, in case something goes wrong after the patient returns home following the treatment, then the patient obviously have no way out from the situation. The perception that patients will have no course for retribution should something go wrong is that simple an

issue to state and equally that complex an issue to solve and is prohibits the growth of medical tourism to some extent. Keeping up with the expectations of the patients, especially when the patient travels from developed countries to emerging world countries where the medical facilities might not be at par with theirs, is extremely difficult. Sometimes patient might find it difficult to get proper pre and post-operative care, particularly if he/she has travelled a long distance for availing the treatment. In case the patient decides to return to the home country soon after the surgery, then he/she may be at risk of several post-operative complications that might be triggered due to long journey like blood clots or pulmonary embolism. In addition, a patient can even suffer from swelling and/or infections by exposing the fragile body too soon to exertion.

However, if a patient is forced to stay for a longer period than expected for any reason, then he/she will have to incur increased cost of the trip, as the extension of the tour may lead to changing flights, paying for accommodation and increase in the daily expenses among others. Travelling to a foreign country for treatment or surgery might pose the risk of catching an infection, as there might be a possibility that the patient will not have immunity prevalent in that country making him prone to infections and allergies.

It might be a possibility that the hospitals and health care providers are not able to maintain acceptable standards. Not only that, hospitals and clinics are required to make extra efforts to provide the services and treatments as per the requirements of the patients. Moreover, if a patient decides to sue a doctor or facility then complicated intra-country laws and legal procedures could pose a real challenge and hinder them from doing so most of the time. To top it up, cross-cultural misunderstandings are another major issue faced by the patients as well as health care providers. Therefore, drawing the attention of enough patients become really difficult and a challenging job for the medical tourism industry. The medical tourism industry is facing more and more challenge as lots of newcomers, who have no experience and understanding o the industry, are jumping on medical tourism bandwagon simply to gain profit without looking at the potential risks.

Many a times, patients enter into an agreement without getting proper information about the procedure and the entire expenditure of the trip. They simply take into consideration the costs for treatment alone and do not understand the cost implications of travel and accommodation and other hidden hospital treatment expenses, which might not be included in the package or are not cleared when booking a treatment. It also becomes difficult to ensure reliable and authentic transfer of medical data between the home country and destination country.

Another major concern for a potential medical tourist is to check on the qualifications of doctors and surgeons. A doctor, who has been struck off the medical register in one country, might be able to

continue his practice in another one. It becomes extremely difficult for the patient to get information about the concerned doctor, as till date there are no international databases that stores information about doctors, surgeons and other medical practitioners. Due to this, there is a lack of transparency in the information provided by most health care providers, which makes numerous potential medical tourists unsure about their decision of taking the big plunge.

Many hospitals in medical travel destinations are not a part of the networks of the payers of developed markets. Therefore, they are not able to work directly with insurance companies and other health care funders, which continue to be a major institutional hurdle in the growth of the medical tourism industry.

Numerous medical procedures and complicated surgeries often require follow-up treatment or additional operations. It is in best interest of the patient to get it performed by the original surgeon only, as he is well aware of your medical condition and will be the best person to take care of your post-operative requirements. This is more important if the patient is suffering from chronic diseases, as according to McKinsey, continuity of care is a major consideration for such patients and it is not clear how well a multinational approach to the delivery of care can successfully deal with this issue. Post-operative care in fact makes the patients rather doubtful about opting for overseas medical treatment.

Lack of coordination among the other market players associated with medical tourism like airline operators, hotels, hospitals and professional services consultants is also challenge for the industry. Mainly because, the success of medical tour and the satisfaction of the potential medical tourist depends on these aspects, to a large extent.

Ethical/legal complications (will go over in other chapters), are a major setback for the medical tourism industry. Simply put, hospitals are answerable to the law in their country and the patient must abide by the destination country's law in the event of bad outcomes or complications after treatment. As the law is associated with the legal recourse, it obviously becomes a major issue. In addition, there are various concerns about the difference in quality of healthcare available to the tourists as compared to the locals of that country along with potential inequities developing in access. Many even predict that in the course of time, various private medical centers might emerge that would specially be catering to tourists taking advantage of the full range of incentives, which was traditionally related to tourism development. This in turn will result in disregard and neglect of the public health care systems of the host country.

Besides, there are several other challenges of medical tourism, which varies from country to country like low pay or insurance coverage, brand awareness, industry cannibalism and taxonomy within the medical tourism market.

