Evolution of Medical Tourism in India – An Overview

Himanshu Sood
PCTE Group of Institutes, Ludhiana, Punjab, India

Abstract
Medical tourism is a growing field and is of core interest of Government of India. The industry is growing at the pace of 25% and is expected to supersede from this present growth statistics. Every country is reporting positive sign of growth in the industry. Even Government of India under its Ministry of Tourism has formulated a separate policy for Medical Tourism. This research paper is study of various aspects of Medical tourism along with initiatives taken by Government of India. It is based on secondary study and discussed various contentious issues in this Industry.

Keywords
Medical Tourism, Technology, Health and Wellness

I. Introduction
Travelling is an eternal concept and people move from one location to another and once country to another for travelling. So the business of travelling across various places and countries is under Tourism Industry. There are multiple kinds of tourism in this world like Recreational tourism, horticulture tourism, environmental tourism, historic tourism, ethnic tourism, adventure tourism and religion based tourism. Apart from these one kind of tourism is very much prominent and is called as Medical Tourism or Health tourism. Medical tourism is all about movement of people from one country to another for the purpose of taking health treatments. Where so ever people get the treatment at much lesser cost than their domestic counterpart, they intend to go to those places. So the industry of Medical tourism as grown exponentially. In India also this business has grown at a very rapid pace. Medical tourism industry is a growing industry in India. In year 2017, the industry was estimated to be at USD 3 bn and is projected to grow by 200% by year 2020 to USD 9 bn. Most of the nationals coming for treatment in India are from either Asia or Africa. Some of the countries are Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, Maldives, Oman, Yemen, Uzbekistan, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania. Apart from these, there are few more countries which have been added up in transferring India for Medical purpose are Australia, Russia, Canada, United Kingdom and United States of America.

There are various reasons for international patients to establish in Indian market and are as follows:

A. Cost Effective
The prime reason for taking medication in India is because of its nature of cost effectiveness. The surgery for replacing valve in United States may cost us around USD 1,40,000 and is out of pocket for many a Americans even, but the same treatment can be taken in India at Apollo hospital in just USD 10,000. Another advantage is a complete medical tourism package for 3 weeks to conduct treatment and travel to various other places in the country. So cost effectiveness is one logic behind opting for India as a lucrative market.

B. Latest Medical Technology
After Thailand, India is second largest market for medical tourists and also in certain time frame, the country has managed to get high tech medical technology and western innovative methods of doing medication procedure at much cost effective price. So the high tech equipments and upgraded medical labs are attracting foreign nationals to take treatment from Indian premium hospitals. Complicated heart surgeries, cancer care and surgeries, neuro and even general surgeries require high-end technology to continually better outcomes, minimize complications, enable faster recovery and reduce length of hospital stay.

C. Experienced Doctors
Another advantage of taking medical treatment from India is about the experienced and well educated doctors. Many a doctors who are part of industry are trained in Western countries or has taken at least some education in Western countries. This is the reason that they are well versed with latest equipments and understand the use of these equipments. If we compare with any other country in Asia, then India has the largest pool of qualified doctors. There are approximately 1.2 mn qualified allopathic doctors, 0.17 mn dental surgeons, 2 mn nurses and 0.8 mn Ayurvedic doctors. Ayurveda in India is considered as the most traditional form of medication and is in practice since ages. Even people from far of places come to get this treatment through natural therapy.

D. Quality of Care
There are approximately 40 hospitals in India which are accredited with global standards called as Joint Commission, a nonprofit organization that make sure the quality standards to be maintained in various hospitals. In US only it has accredited 22000 hospitals and when patient travel from US to India for treatment, they can easily trust on the hospital if accredited by Joint Commission. So quality of care is definitely part of the industry.

E. Ease of Travel and Language
Also there are no visa restrictions in India and any patient on medical grounds can come to India for treatment. Also, the language is not a barrier, because all the doctors and support staff in big hospitals are aware of English and use it as mode of communication.

II. Medical Tourism Policy initiative in India and Government Support
Medical Tourism is small component of various types of tourism in the country. As the market for this type of tourism is growing, so the government is also ready to extend its helping hand to proliferate this industry. The major reason is, it help our own health industry to get equipped with latest high technology. The probability of brain drain can be reduced with the help of foreign trained Indian doctors. These doctors will get an international platform to work in India. Apart from it, Government has started with series of measures for this industry to grow and is as follows:

1. As the digitalization is flourishing from past decade, the government has started with a web portal for disseminating comprehensive information for the foreign patients seeking treatment in India. The name of the portal is www.indiahealthcaretourism.com and is single window platform
to get information about Medical Tourism and its procedure in India. For the convenience of overseas users, the website is launched in four languages i.e. English, Russian, Arabic and French. This is to provide holistic information to the overseas patients.

2. Government has streamlined the visa process for medical tourists. The process has become so efficient and it’s easy for foreigner to take the visa without any lengthy procedures. Also the visa can be granted in short duration. Even in some of the major Airports in India, government has created a separate immigration counters for facilitating medical tourists.

3. The government is planning to set up six facilitation centers at various airports like in Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Delhi, Goa and Kolkata. Apart from it, government is also planning to focus more on home stays arrangements for these kinds of tourists, so as to comfort their stay in India.

4. By considering the exponential growth in the medical tourism industry in India, the government is planning to standardize the cost of many of operations so as to provide real time information and everything will be transparent and will be on the website of the medical tourism. Even before arriving in India, the tourists under this category can see the place and hospital where they are going to get treatment. Also, they can get the access the doctor’s qualification and his / her experience before coming to India.

5. Even India participated in the trade fair ITB Berlin to promote the medical tourism services in the overseas markets. India booked a 4 sq m space in this international travel exhibition and demonstrated its services in Germany. Also, Indian government got published so much of material in the form of broacher, CDs and other promotional materials and circulated in many a target countries in the world.

6. India has done many road shows for promoting medical tourism. In year 2009, road show was conducted in some of the places in Middle East like Dubai, Riyadh, Kuwait and Doha.

7. Government of India in its medical tourism policy facilitated the Market Development Assistance for promotion of Indian based medical services in foreign markets. So this scheme is applicable to Wellness Tourism Services Providers and Medical Tourism Services Providers.

8. Ministry of Tourism provides financial support for those promoting medical tourism of India in foreign markets at the ratio of 50:50 with maximum support of Rs. 10 Lakh.

9. Conduct of Workshop, seminars and events by Ministry of Tourism with at least 100 participants and 50% of the participants should be foreign passport holders.

10. The Government also started with incredible India scheme for attracting foreign medical tourists. The minister of Tourism would give permission for the use of the logo designed for incredible India. Also the facilitation of promotion through movies, literature and various publications is granted.

III. Medical Tourists - Statistics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medical Tourists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>184298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>233918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>361060</td>
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</tbody>
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So, these numbers are gradually increasing as government’s efforts to consider Wellness and medical tourism as into niche category under Ministry of Tourism.

IV. Challenges in Medical Tourism

There are lots of benefits in medical tourism. Its win – win situation for everyone. The hospitals get the business from foreign tourists, the doctors get more fees for same treatments, the government gets foreign exchange, the airlines get the customers in form of passangers, the immigration officers make money, the nurses and other hospital support staff makes money and ultimately tourists’ footfall in India increases which makes the credibility of Indian brand. But there are certain challenges also associated with this business and are as follows:

A. The Follow up Problems

The first and foremost challenge is to make a regular visit to the hospital after getting the treatment or the surgery done. As it is mandatory to visit the doctor after regular intervals of time. This is quite possible if the patient is staying nearby or in the same state or country, but if the patient goes back to his / her country then it becomes challenging to have a visit again and again. This is so much time consuming and even costly affair. Even the advancement of information technology has grown but still it’s important to have a physical interaction meeting between doctor and patient.

B. The problem of culture and language

Another major problem is the barrier of culture and the language. Sometimes, the doctor and hospital staff is expert in the treatment but not well conversant with the patient and even patient also find it hard to discuss the problem in another language. So this barrier can have serious repercussion and create trouble for all.

C. The Challenge of Brain Drain

Another major impediment in this business is brain drain. Under this challenge, the best of the Indian hospitals are finding it hard to appoint expert and talented doctors because majoring of the best brains move outside and adapt the profession in developed country where they get better returns than staying back in India where the salaries are comparatively less. So government must tackle this issue in support of medical tourism.

D. Lack of Professionalism

Though we have bought high tech machines and so many medical treatments have got automated, but still a sense of compassion and sympathetic behavior in dealing with patient is missing. So it’s important that doctors and hospital staff should be imparted with training about soft skills and to teach them maintaining interpersonal relations.

E. Legal Problems

In some countries, there are certain malpractices happen in the country in the business of medical services. The laws under medical profession are not uniform across the world. So in any case, if any patient encounters any challenge, then there is a little space for getting fair compensation. So legal problems can act as challenge.

Apart from above, India definitely has to work in the field of generating infrastructure and also try to promote this service to
as many countries as possible, so as to achieve its target of USD 9 bn worth industry by year 2020.

V. Conclusion

India is a growing market and because of its demography, everyone is looking for this market. As already noticed, the medical tourism industry is growing exponentially. Though its challenging to achieve 200% growth in 2020 to USD 9 bn but its achievable. Already Indian government is liberalizing visa norms and facilitating support for this sector in its medical tourism policy. So by imparting some soft skills training and with advancing interpreters in this sector, the government can revolutionize this industry. One core area where it’s very important for government to work with is retaining best talented doctors in India as brain drain is detrimental for this business. Sometimes patients check the qualification and experience of the doctors rather than the branding of hospitals. So it’s very important to retain good and qualified doctors.

References


