

Medical Tourism Helping a Number of Economies

Medical tourism is now a common phenomenon with more and more people seeking affordable and quality healthcare abroad. Countries that attract medical tourists have in turn benefited economically.

In the past, medical tourism was associated with terminally-ill wealthy individuals seeking top-notch healthcare in advanced hospitals. It also connoted people traveling mainly to Brazil and Thailand, for cheap cosmetic surgeries. Whereas all these may have been true, medical tourism now involves patients going for medical attention and non-cosmetic surgery. Destination countries are also now more varied.



The trend now is more people seeking affordable healthcare than cosmetic operations, and this has attracted companies and countries that have seen the commercial opportunity. Nations like Turkey, Romania and Mexico are investing heavily in private healthcare system with an eye on American and European clientele.

Reports point to an increase in the amount of American patients traveling to Mexico in search of affordable treatments. Estimates by Patients Beyond Borders put the figure of American patients visiting Mexico at between 200,000 and 1.1 million. Mexico is capitalizing on this with plans to offer incentives to ailing Americans willing to go south. The country's Tourism Board is also aggressively promoting health and medical tourism to Americans.

Turkey is also a major player in medical tourism. The country has a particular branch in their tourism board dedicated to promoting Turkey as a medical tourism hub. Romania has been pushing for a Turkish-Romanian collaboration that would boost investments along the Black Sea. Romania's selling point is the country's natural resources that include health spas and baths.



Thailand's selling point is an existing excellent healthcare system that offers quality services at an affordable cost. On average, medical services in Thailand are cheaper than in America by 50–70%. Thailand also has experience in the market having been a major player in the cosmetic surgery and gender reassignment operations. With the changing face of medical tourism, Thailand is adapting to the emerging market. The country is revamping its mainstream healthcare system to be ready for traveling patients. Patients Beyond Borders' figures indicate that an estimated 2 million foreign patients sought treatment in Thailand in the year 2013.

Singapore has an advanced health care system that also attracts many foreigners. According to Patients Beyond Borders, about 610,000 people visited Singapore either for treatment or cosmetic procedures in 2013. The government and private healthcare investors continue to invest in their bid to bring in more ailing tourists. It is estimated that traveling patients make up 30% of the sick in Singapore.

Patients choose to seek treatment abroad because of cost considerations or because they are in need of alternative treatments. In the pursuit of health, they are willing to spend, and this makes them vulnerable. Their vulnerability and the astronomical figures involved make the industry very attractive to unethical professionals. Recently numerous online travel agencies appeared promising to match patients with best hospitals and doctors.

The very nature of these travel agencies makes regulation hard, and this has led to many cases of duped patients. There are also many horrifying stories of patients being operated by rogue surgeons who offer them no post-operative support system. Other doctors leave the patients after surgeries gone wrong.



When patients return home, some cases develop complications, and this has led to cost implications for the home countries as they try to correct or reverse procedures gone wrong. It is for such reasons that organizations like The British Association of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons (BAPRAS) and Patients Beyond Borders have taken it upon themselves to educate patients going overseas for

medical care.

All pointers indicate that people will continue traveling in search of treatment or cosmetic surgery. The industry will keep on growing if demand for cheaper options continues to rise. Unless developed nations like the US and Britain look for ways to bring down health care costs, their citizens will keep giving business to the countries lining themselves up to cater for medical tourists. The destination countries have an obligation in regulating their professionals and promoting only what is safe and responsible. Those willing to travel must, however, remain vigilant and go for quality that is affordable.

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