U.S. MEDICAL TOURISM – STEADY GROWTH

Since ancient times people have turned to travel to faraway lands in the pursuit of health and wellness, as well as recreation and spiritually enlightened. The ancients travelled to Greece, North Africa, Egypt, and Rome for all these things and even today little has changed. In fact, with the advances, we've made in modern medicine, and of course communication and transportation technology it should be no surprise that the medical tourism industry is bigger than ever.

At least 20 million people a year across the globe travel abroad to receive cheaper, and sometimes even superior quality medical care. The medical tourism is big and it's global, and it continues to grow. Patients spend on average $3,410 per visit in American dollars. This includes traveling and accommodation costs as well as their medical expenses. While this may not sound cheap to some, for many it is much less than what they would spend obtaining treatment in the United States.

Experts estimate that 1.9 million Americans travel abroad to get their medical treatment elsewhere. It often gives them comparable or even superior quality care than what they would get in their own country, and it saves them big money!

Healthcare costs are continuing to rise in the United States, and many have found themselves unable to afford health insurance altogether. A recent study by Gallup indicates that 13.7% of Americans were still uninsured at the end of 2018. That's around 30 million adults across the U.S that remain without coverage.

Even those lucky enough to have insurance still find themselves feeling the sting as they pay thousands in out of pocket expenses.

American insurance providers and employers are both painfully aware of this fact and many companies are beginning to look to the medical tourism industry in order to cut costs. Consider the fact that a knee surgery in the United States costing $33,000 would cost half that price if the procedure was performed in India. India is not alone, however, many countries can boast an advanced healthcare system but at a fraction of the cost. Costa Rica, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand are some countries that are known to save Americans as much as 80% on their otherwise staggering healthcare costs.

Employers and insurance providers are both pursuing this option as a way to save money. They often partner with what is known as Centers of Excellence to connect patients with out of state or even out of country healthcare that is affordable and high quality.

Walmart, Boeing, Jet Blue, and Pepsi are just a few examples of major corporate players that are beginning to adopt this model and save a lot of money. More and more major companies are developing a need for improving their dynamics on medical travels.

One index has been designed by the Medical Tourism Association. It works to identify three key metrics that are vital to success in choosing a destination in a patient's medical tourism trip. Some factors they seek to include in this model are the quality of the facilities and what services may need to be provided to facilitate the patient's trip. They also want to consider the environment of the destination itself and the medical tourism industry and their network in the destination.

In this, they considered many other factors and subsets to include in their measurement. In the destination environment, they consider the economy, the culture, and of course the local safety metrics. The medical tourism dynamic considers costs of travel, how attractive the area may be as a destination, as well as the reputation and accreditation of the healthcare industry there.

The Medical Tourism Association released a recent survey to determine what drove the market. They stated that 100% of professionals and institutions in the healthcare industry placed the highest priority on clinical experience and professional credentials when considering destinations. This matters to patients and it will continue to drive them to medical travel.

While most of these travel sites have done well and poured a great deal of resources into developing these metrics many have struggled to keep up. Data management presents a particularly difficult challenge, especially as the number of international patients continues to rise. Managing this data as it goes back and forth among patients, providers, and various health care institutions become more important than ever.

According to the Pulse Survey mentioned above, about 40% of these sites simply do not have the technology or resources to provide the right technology for data protection, raising some privacy concerns.

This has only been complicated as the Global Data Protection Regulation came into place making this more problematic as sites struggle to find themselves in compliance. This regulation has provided a certain standard in data protection and has sought to hold institutions liable for breaches. This raised the standard a bit higher and has played a key role in choosing health travel destinations.

Data protection is not all that is at stake, however. Communication and logistics and working out the details of travel are all thorns in the side for everyone. Post-care coordination is also a critical issue. These factors continue to present a challenge.

Many patients also find themselves worried, depending on the destination, that they may pick up an infectious disease from the exotic destination. **The risk involved there is also worrisome for insurance providers who may find themselves in more than they bargained for.** This could also include coverage for accidents and travel-related health complications.

The industry has grown in leaps and bounds over the years, however, there are still many challenges

that must be overcome. These barriers can be overturned by the right technologies as these medical travel destinations invest the right resources in getting over these hurdles that impede access to proper and affordable medical care.

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