

MEDICAL TOURISM INDUSTRY KEEPS GROWING DESPITE LIMITATIONS



More and more people travel abroad for surgeries and other procedures. Medical tourism is growing in popularity. Barbados is well known for assisted reproduction treatments, Bangkok for sex reassignment surgery, Hungary and Mexico are popular for dental procedures.

Turkey attracts patients looking for hair transplant procedures. According to the statistics, the country welcomed 700,000 medical tourists in 2017. Over the last decade, medical tourism in Turkey increased ten times. Local experts estimated that this year the country will welcome 850,000 visitors.

According to the International Medical Travel Journal (IMTJ). Turkey is ranked third in medical tourism. The United States holds the first position, followed by South Korea the second. Thailand was the fourth and Germany fifth on the list of top destinations for medical tourism purposes.

It is hard however to address the numbers accurately, partly because of the differences among countries in the concept of what is considered medical tourism. For example, some British statistics include visits to spas or tourists becoming ill on holiday.

Allied Market Research, a research firm, set the value of the giant industry at US\$61 billion in 2016. Keith Pollard, director of LaingBuisson, a health care research team of specialists in medical tourism data, believes that this number is much smaller, with an estimate around US\$10 to 15 billion.

The growing number of middle-class patients in Asian and African countries means more people are willing to spend money when they have limited access to medical treatment in their homes.

For example, an average heart-valve replacement surgery costs €30,000 (about US\$35,000) in Germany, but only €15,000 in the neighboring Austria, with little to no difference in quality of this procedure. A hip replacement surgery can cost around €12,000 in Great Britain, €10,000 in Turkey, and only €4,725 in Poland.

Governments are taking measures to face the rising demand for medical tourism. South Korea, Malaysia and Dubai have all invested heavily in establishing regional centers of medical experts to attract foreign patients. The Dubai Healthcare City aims to attract patients from the Gulf nations who in the past have been sent to Europe or USA as a measure of their healthcare systems.

Keith Pollard agrees that international travel for in vitro fertilization (IVF) is increasing rapidly because many wealthy countries have placed restrictions to free treatment. While several European countries, such as Germany, offer only three rounds of IVF and limit access to those with medical conditions or younger women.

Patients often do not realize that these “facilitators” could be working exclusively with certain clinics, meaning that they receive undisclosed sums of money. If things go wrong, patients may have less recourse to help. Doctors have been complaining about people returning from medical trips

abroad with complications after their treatments.

But making money out of medical tourism can still prove to be difficult. Variations in exchange rates can virtually make a destination less appealing in an instant. The market for “scalpel safaris” in South Africa has proven to be volatile, according to people in the business, due to currency fluctuations. Sometimes, demands simply fail to materialize. When work started on Health City Cayman Islands, a 2,000-bed hospital, the US\$ 2 billion project was expected to attract more than 17,000 foreign patients annually, mostly from the United States. But after the first wing of the hospital opened in 2014, the International Medical Travel Journal reported that less than 1,000 foreign patients arrived in its first year. According to a subsequent investigation led by a government public accounts committee, one reason was that its sponsors based their projections of client numbers on a flawed study. **Fewer American patients arrived than expected, partly because health insurers had no interest in sending people abroad for treatments.**

Vikram Kapur, a partner at Bain & Company, says that China has been an exporter of patients in the past, but now American hospitals, such as Johns Hopkins, Cleveland Clinic and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC), are undertaking joint ventures with Chinese hospitals to provide services to patients closer to their homes. One way or another, healthcare is becoming more accessible.

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