

## Editorial

### Medical Tourism



**Dr Golokbihari Maji**

**MS (Ortho)**

*Hony Editor, Journal of IMA (JIMA)*

Medical tourism involves patients travelling from their home country to foreign country, where they must make arrangements for their treatment and stay. When seeking care in a foreign country, patients use various agents including insurance companies and healthcare providers. It is a concept wherein people travel to another city or country to get medical treatment, to find a cheaper place for the medical procedures of same quality. In some countries certain medical procedures are not legal, such as infertility procedures. Mostly, people around the world travel to Medical centres in well developed countries, to receive good quality of treatments. But in recent years, we can see a rise in the people from well developed countries, travelling to third – world countries for medical treatments. This is mostly because of the treatment available in such countries are very low in cost.

10 best countries for medical tourism and overseas healthcare are:

Brazil	–	For fantastic plastic surgery,
Mexico	–	Most affordable dental services,
Panama	–	General health care,
Czech Republic	–	Cosmetic surgeries and teeth whitening,
Costa Rica	–	General health care and dental care,
Turkey	–	Eye health care,
India	–	Top destination for serious surgical procedures,
Thailand	–	Cosmetic surgeries,
Singapore	–	Replacement surgeries of hip and knee,
Malaysia	–	Vitro fertilization.

Yet there are certain risks of Medical tourism, some of which are mentioned below:

- Communication may be a problem,
- Medication may be counterfeit or of poor quality in some countries,
- Antibiotic resistance is a global problem, and resistant bacteria may be more common in other countries than in United States,
- Flying after surgery can increase the risk of blood clots.

From the latest report, Finland is found to have the best health care system in the World, it is also the 14<sup>th</sup> best country over all.

The first recorded instance of people travelling for medical treatment dates back thousands of years to when Greek pilgrims travelled from the eastern Mediterranean to a small area in the saronic Gulf called Epidauria. This territory was the sanctuary of the healing god Asklepios spa towns and sanatoria were early forms of medical tourism. In 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, patients visited spas because these were places with supposedly health – giving mineral waters, treating diseases from gout to liver disorders and bronchitis.

Factors that have led to the increasing popularity of medical travel include the high cost of health care, long waiting times for certain procedures, the ease and affordability of international level and improvement of both technology and standard of care in many countries. The avoidance of waiting time is the leading factor for medical tourism from the UK, whereas in the US, the main reason is cheaper price abroad. Furthermore, death rates even in developed countries differ extremely, i.e. UK verses seven other leading countries, including US. Many surgical procedures performed in medical tourism destinations cost a fraction of the price they do in other countries. In the United States, a liver transplant that may cost \$ 300,000 USD, would generally cost about \$ 91,000 USD in Taiwan. A large draw to medical travel is convenience and speed. Countries that operate public health care systems often have long wait times for certain operations for example an estimated 78236 Canadian patients spent an average waiting time of 9.4 weeks on medical waiting list in a year. Canada has also set waiting time bench marks for non-urgent medical procedures, including 26 weeks waiting period for a hip replacement and 16 weeks wait for cataract operation.

However, perception of medical tourism are not always positive. In places like the US, which has high standard of quality, medical tourism is viewed as risky. In some parts of the world, wider political issues can influence where medical tourist will choose to seek out health care.

Circumvention tourism is also an area of medical tourism that has grown. Circumvention tourism is travel in order to access medical services that are legal in destination country but illegal in the home country. This can include travel for fertility treatment that are not yet approved in the home country, abortion and doctor- assisted suicide. Abortion tourism most commonly found in Europe, where travel between countries is relatively simple. Ireland and Poland, two European countries with highly restrictive abortion laws, have the highest rates of circumvention tourism. In Poland especially, it is estimated that each year nearly 7000 women travel to UK, where abortion services are free through the National Health Services.

### *Medical tourism in India :*

Medical tourism is a growing sector in India. In October 2015, India's medical tourism sector was estimated to be worth US \$ 3 billion. It is projected to grow at a CAGR of 200% by 2020, hitting \$ 9 billion by 2020. In 2017, 495,056 patients visited to seek medical care. The top 10 sources countries for patients were Bangladesh, Afganistan, Iraq, Maldives, Oman, Yemen, Uzbekistan, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania.

To encourage applications and ease the travel process for medical tourists, the government has expanded its e-tourism VISA regime on February 2019, to include medical visas. The maximum duration to stay under this visa is 6 months.

The promotion of Medical Tourism in India has helped private players capitalize on this market opportunity. Private institutions and organizations, such as Max Healthcare where Health Travelers worldwide have consulted and treated upto 50,000 foreign patients in hospitals across the country.

### *Attractions :*

Advantage of medical treatment in India include reduced cost, the availability of latest medical technologies and a growing compliance on international quality standard, doctors trained in western countries including United States and United Kingdom, as well as English speaking personnel, due to which foreigners are less likely to face language barrier in India.

### *Advantages :*

Cost – Most estimates found that treatment cost in India start at around one –tenth of the price of comparable treatment in United States and United Kingdom. The most popular treatments sought in India by medical tourists are alternative medicine, bone –marrow transplant, cardiac bypass, eye surgery and hip replacement.

### *Quality Care :*

India has 39 JCI accredited hospitals. However, for a patient travelling to India, it is important to find the optimal doctor-hospital combination. After the patient has been treated, the patient has the option of either recuperating in the hospital or at a paid accommodation nearby. Many hospitals also give the option of continuing the treatment through telemedicine.

The city of Chennai has been termed as “India's health capital.” Multi and super speciality hospitals across the city bring in an estimated 150 international patients every day. Chennai attracts about 45 percent of health tourists from abroad arriving in the country and 30 to 40 percent domestic health tourists. Factors behind the tourist inflow in the city include low costs, little to no waiting period, and facilities offered at the specialty hospitals in the city. The city has an estimated 12,500 hospital beds, of which only half in used by city population with rest being shared by patients from other states of the country and foreigners. Dental clinics have

attracted dental care tourism in Chennai.

### *Ease of Travel :*

The government has removed visa restrictions on tourist visa that required a two months gap between consecutive visits for people from Gulf countries, which is likely to boost medical tourism. A visa-on-arrival scheme for tourists from selected countries has been instituted which allows foreign nationals to stay in India for 30 days for medical reasons. From 2016 citizens from Bangladesh, Afganistan, Maldives, Republic of Korea and Nigeria are availing the most medical visas.

### *Language :*

Despite India's diversity of languages, English is an official language and is widely spoken by most people and almost universally by medical professionals. A number of hospitals have hired language translators to make patients from Balkan and African countries feel more comfortable while at the same time helping the facilitation of their treatment.

Top medical Tourism destinations in India:-

- Chennai
- Mumbai
- New Delhi
- Calcutta
- Goa
- Banglaroe
- Ahmedabad
- Coimbatore
- Vellore
- Alleppy
- Hyderabad

The names of popular healthcare providers in India are given below : –

- Apollo Hospitals
- Max Hospitals
- Fortis Hospitals
- Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospitals
- Wockhardt Hospital
- Narayana Hrudayalaya Hospitals
- Metro Group of Hospitals
- Manipal Hospitals
- Medanta Hospitals

India is becoming the 2<sup>nd</sup> Medical tourism destination after Thailand. As medical treatment costs in the developed world is ballooning with United States leading the way, more and more westerners are finding the prospect of international travel for medical care increasingly appealing. An estimated 15,000 of these travel to India for low priced health care procedures every year. Cosmetic surgery, bariatric surgery, knee cap transplantation, liver transplants and cancer treatment are some of the most sought out medical tourism procedures chosen by foreigners.

### **Disclaimer**

The information and opinions presented in the Journal reflect the views of the authors and not of the Journal or its Editorial Board or the Publisher. Publication does not constitute endorsement by the journal.

JIMA assumes no responsibility for the authenticity or reliability of any product, equipment, gadget or any claim by medical establishments/institutions/manufacturers or any training programme in the form of advertisements appearing in JIMA and also does not endorse or give any guarantee to such products or training programme or promote any such thing or claims made so after. — *Hony Editor*