

MEDICAL TOURISM – PRESENT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Abstract

Medical tourism is booming in developing countries like India. Patients from the Western part of the world are travelling all the way to get quality and affordable medical services for their health issues. The growing number of private health facilities makes these countries perfect destinations for medical tourism. Although there is a new record of foreign patients seen every year, there are some concerns with respect to the regulation of this mechanism, safety, security, and equity of healthcare provision that need to be addressed. Medical tourism will reach new heights in the future but for healthy growth of it, all necessary measures should be taken.

Keywords: medical tourism; wellness tourism; data safety; artificial intelligence; accreditation

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Medical Tourism” refers to the process of people traveling across borders (both international and national) to receive some form of medical treatment [1]. People have been eager to travel for healthcare access ever since the idea of healthcare first emerged. The concept of long-distance travel for health reasons, and marketing destinations for that purpose, is undoubtedly nothing new. Spas have been around since the time of the Sumerians, Greeks, and Romans, as have the supposed therapeutic qualities of alpine and seaside health resorts in early modern Europe [2]. In the past, people used to travel from less developed countries to medical centers in more developed nations, but recently the trend has reversed where developing countries are preferred due to medical services being offered at lower prices. This chapter explores the evolving landscape of medical tourism, analyzing emerging trends, potential challenges, and the prospects for this global phenomenon. As countries worldwide strive to enhance their healthcare offerings and attract medical tourists, it is crucial to examine the factors that will shape the future of this industry.

II. FACTORS BEHIND THE GROWTH OF MEDICAL TOURISM

Some of the motivators for Medical Tourism include [3]:

- 1. Cost Savings:** Rising healthcare costs and increased insurance billing in developed countries. For example, a liver transplant that may cost US\$300,000 in the United States would generally cost about US\$91,000 in Taiwan [4].

Table 1: Medical Tourism prices in selected Countries [5]

Procedure	US	India	Thailand	Singapore	Malaysia	Mexico	Cuba	Poland	Hungary	UK
Heart bypass (CABG)	113 000	10 000	13 000	20 000	9 000	3 250		7 140		13 921
Heart Valve replacement	150 000	9 500	11 000	13 000	9 000	18 000		9 520		
Angioplasty	47 000	11 000	10 000	13 000	11 000	15 000		7 300		8 000
Hip replacement	47 000	9 000	12 000	11 000	10 000	17 300		6 120	7 500	12 000
Knee replacement	48 000	8 500	10 000	13 000	8 000	14 650		6 375		10 162
Gastric bypass	35 000	11 000	15 000	20 000	13 000	8 000		11 069		
Hip resurfacing	47 000	8 250	10 000	12 000	12 500	12 500		7 905		
Spinal fusion	43 000	5 500	7 000	9 000		15 000				
Mastectomy	17 000	7 500	9 000	12 400		7 500				
Rhinoplasty	4 500	2 000	2 500	4 375	2 083	3 200	1 535	1 700	2 858	3 500
Tummy Tuck	6 400	2 900	3 500	6 250	3 903	3 000	1 831	3 500	3 136	4 810
Breast reduction	5 200	2 500	3 750	8 000	3 343	3 000	1 668	3 146	3 490	5 075
Breast implants	6 000	2 200	2 600	8 000	3 308	2 500	1 248	5 243	3 871	4 350
Crown	385	180	243	400	250	300		246	322	330
Tooth whitening	289	100	100		400	350		174	350	500
Dental implants	1 188	1 100	1 429	1 500	2 636	950		953	650	1 600

* Costs of surgeries around the world. Costs given in US\$

** The price comparisons for surgery take into account hospital and doctor charges, but do not include the costs of flights and hotel bills for the expected length of stay.

2. Reduced waiting Times: Due to long waiting lists in home countries, especially those that have public health care systems, for example, in Canada in the year 2022, specialist physicians surveyed report a median waiting time of 27.4 weeks between referral from a general practitioner and receipt of treatment. It also has a 26-week waiting period for a hip replacement and a 16-week wait for cataract surgery [6].

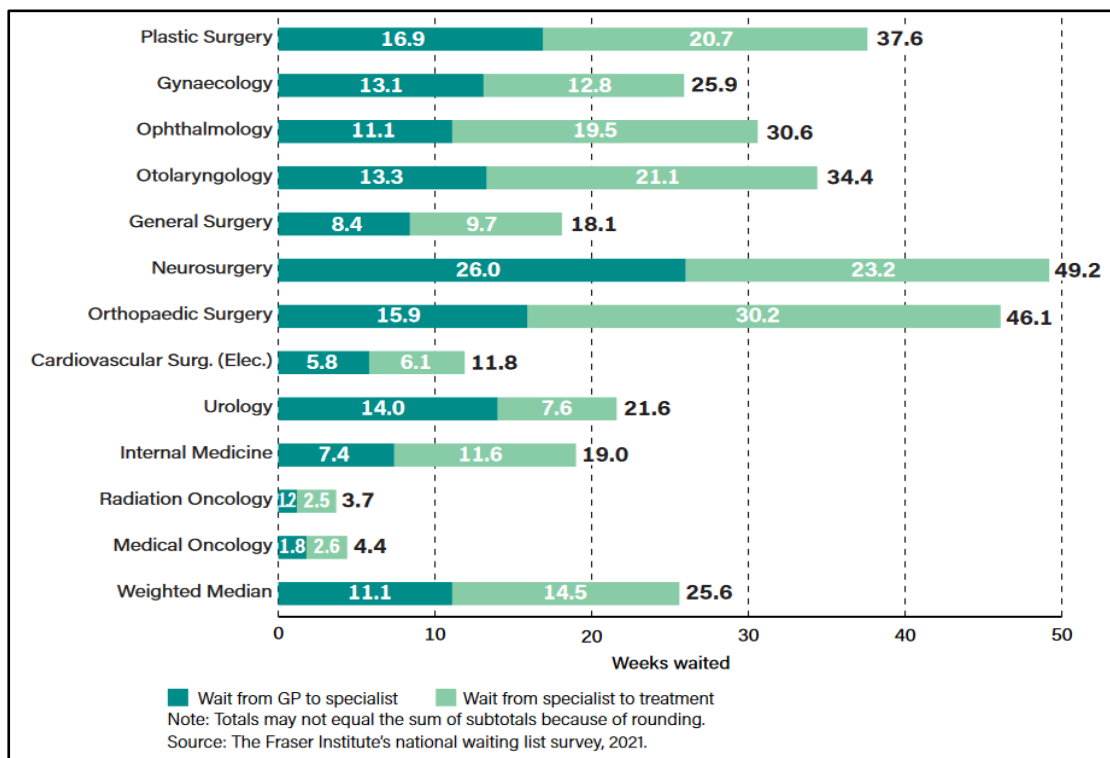


Figure 1: Median wait by specialty in 2021 – weeks waited from referral by GP to treatment [6]

3. Quality of care: The reputation of certain countries for providing high-quality healthcare, access to specialized treatments, advanced procedures, and renowned specialists and medical facilities [7].

4. Ease and Affordability of International Travel: Nowadays many of the most well-known airline companies are working hand in hand with medical tourism facilitator companies and in some cases, even directly with medical centers. For example, Turkey has recently made their special medical visa available which grants a 25 percent discount to all medical tourists that use Turkish Airlines [8].

Indian Context: India has been ranked 10th in Medical Tourism Index (MTI) for 2020-21 out of 46 destinations by the Medical Tourism Association [10]. Medical tourism is rising in the Indian subcontinent due to lower treatment costs than in developed countries, easily available medical tourism visas (M-visas), availability of high-quality healthcare where several professionals who have trained wholly or in part in the US/ UK, English being widely spoken, particularly among professionals and lastly availability of alternate forms of medicine such as Ayurveda, AYUSH, Naturopathy, Yoga etc. Moreover, India has close to 40 hospitals accredited by US Joint Commission [1].

III. CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN MEDICAL TOURISM

The growth of medical tourism should not be at the cost of safety, security, and provision of necessary medical services to the needy ones. In this regard, both the home countries and destination countries can take responsibility to address the existing challenges in continuing healthy medical tourism.

Challenges specific to home countries are as follows [10]:

- **Inadequate Regulation within the Industry:** The medical tourism industry is global and involves many parties beyond patients and health service providers. Currently, international regulation within the industry is lacking. This might put the citizens of the country in a vulnerable position abroad [11].
- **Lack of Systematic Reporting of Clinical Outcomes:** Data about the outcomes of surgery and therapies of medical tourists from hospitals in developing countries is lacking, leaving citizens to make important decisions without having access to this valuable information [12].
- **Replacement of Clinical Decisions with Financial Ones:** In order to reduce costs there have been reports of patients reducing the recommended recovery period between 2 orthopaedic procedures [13].
- **Exposure to New Health and Safety Risks:** While risks are always anticipated with respect to medical interventions, some unique ones with respect to medical tourism include traveling on long flights soon after major surgery might bring about deep vein thrombosis due to compromised mobility [14].
- **Threats to Informational Continuity of Care:** Systems to ensure a smooth flow of medical information between physicians from home and destination countries are lacking [15].
- **Provision of follow-up Care and Monitoring:** In spite of citizens preferring treatment abroad, post-operative rehabilitation and recovery happen in the home country, which might need specific expertise and could turn out to be costly [16].
- **Procedures might be Illegal or Untested:** Due to their experimental status or to ethical objections to certain procedures in their home countries, some patients go abroad by their desire to access procedures that are illegal or unavailable in their home countries, referred to as “circumvention tourism”. For example, abortion services, doctor-assisted suicide, etc [17]
- **Health Inequities could be Exacerbated:** Since medical tourism is one of the ways of bypassing limitations in home countries, it could exacerbate inequities as only certain people are able to afford it [18].

Challenges specific to destination countries are as follows:

- Development of a two-tiered healthcare system, where foreign patients benefit from sophisticated private hospitals with a high staff-to-patient ratio and expensive, state-of-the-art medical equipment, whereas the local population only has access to basic, under-resourced health facilities [19].
- While there might be a reversal of the international brain drain, an internal brain drain may occur with professionals leaving public health facilities to work for larger super-specialty hospitals [20].
- Resources may be taken away from the rural sector and invested in the private sector; thereby the actual needy population gets overlooked.

IV. THE FUTURE OF MEDICAL TOURISM

1. Technological Advancements in Medical Tourism

- **Telemedicine and Virtual Consultations:** In the wake of COVID-19, many healthcare players switched to telemedicine as preliminary consultations and even post-operative care to an extent could be carried out over the phone for overseas patients [21].
- **Robotics and Artificial Intelligence (AI):** Global market for robotic surgeries is expected to reach USD 18.2 billion in 2030 and will open the door for a greater share of medical value travellers seeking out top-notch care from around the world [22]. Moreover, the different types of Tourism and travel industry are taking advantage of Artificial intelligence (AI) in order to perform a variety of administrative and customer service tasks [23].
- **Digital Health Records and Data Analytics:** Initiatives like Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (India) plan to store Electronic Health Records (EHR) digitally with the healthcare providers and can be used to transfer details of care provided with consent and facilitate seamless patient care. It can also be used to discover prices coupled with information on success ratios of treatments in different hospitals which can further increase the traffic of medical tourists [24].

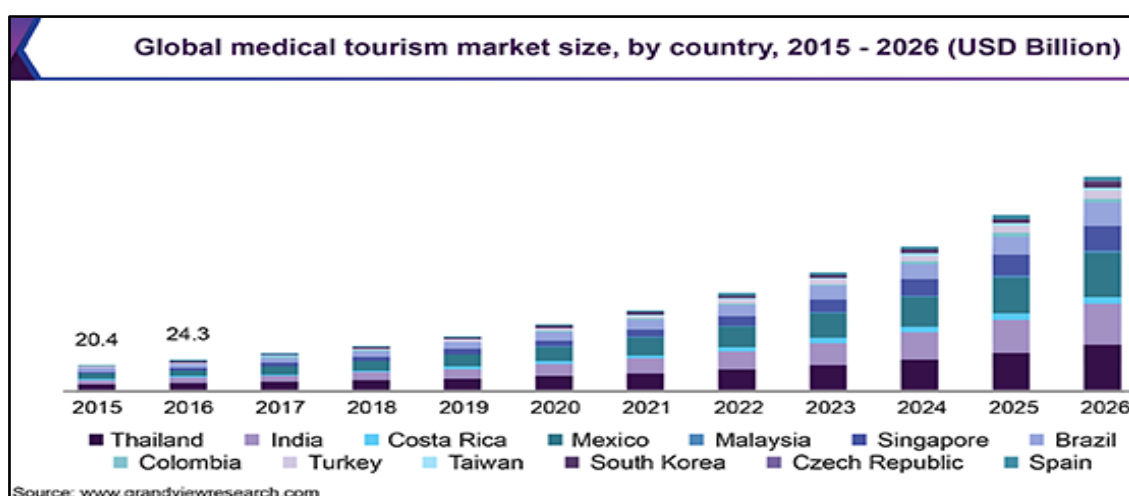


Figure 2: Global medical tourism market size, by country, 2015 – 2026 (USD Billion)

- 2. Changing Patient Preferences and Expectations:** Recently the focus has shifted to holistic approaches to health care. "Health tourism" has replaced the phrase "medical tourism" as a more general description of travel that emphasizes receiving medical care and using healthcare services. It encompasses a broad spectrum of health-oriented travel, from therapeutic and rehabilitative trips to preventative and health-conductive treatments. Wellness tourism is one such upcoming field, where India has a major role to play [25].

V. RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

- 1. Ensuring Patient Safety and Quality Standards:** Organisations like Joint Commission International, QHA Trent Accreditation, and Accreditation Canada work with hospitals to meet standards for patient care and then accredit them. There is a need for more healthcare institutions to meet international standards to ensure a safe and smooth experience for medical tourists [26].
- 2. Transparent Pricing and Cost Estimates:** Health institutes should give a clear picture of the estimated costs of various procedures so that a medical tourist can take a well-informed choice. There is also a need for regulations to ensure fair prices across destinations [27].
- 3. Patient Rights and Privacy:** Need for more robust legal frameworks to safeguard patient data and privacy and ensure a smooth legal discourse if the need arises [28].
- 4. Integration of Holistic Care and Alternative Therapies:** There is a need for incorporating complementary and alternative medicine into medical tourism offerings and integrating traditional healing practices of host countries into treatment plans [29].
- 5. Brain Drain and Local Healthcare Systems:** Special attention in mitigating the impact of healthcare professionals migrating to popular medical tourism destinations and developing strategies to ensure adequate healthcare resources for the local population should be considered [30].

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