

Asia an emerging hotspot in medical tourism

March 9, 2015 | Analysis | By Aishwarya Venkatesh

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Singapore: *BioSpectrum feels the pulse of Asia's top destinations and major players in medical tourism.*

Medical tourism industry is growing worldwide. Frost and Sullivan predicts that the Asian health tourism market is around \$65 billion in 2014, growing at a rate of 20 percent. It involves nearly 50 countries out of which a few Asian countries are leading the race. The World Health Organization has estimated that Thailand, India and Singapore enjoy nearly 90 percent of this niche market share in Asia.

Malaysia, Korea, and Philippines are other popular destinations for medical value travel. These countries have invested heavily in their healthcare infrastructure to meet the increased demand for accredited medical care through first-class facilities. Increasingly, Asian countries are aggressively promoting treatments, offering them at rates as cheap as 80 percent compared to developed countries, with no compromise on quality. Some patients are drawn to Asian countries due to its holistic approach towards healing, involving techniques like yoga and meditation, alongside latest medical developments.

Once enticed by the prospect of combining discounted healthcare with a holiday, medical tourists are being lured to developing Asian countries by the quality and broad range of treatment, from heart surgery to joint replacements. Chinese medicines, Ayurveda, have gained popularity and with growing incidences of side effects reported from allopathic treatment, people are shifting to alternative therapies.

These Asian nations are now competing on quality and price; developing their own health tourism strategy to grab a slice of market share. Korea is known as the Mecca for cosmetic surgeries. Foreigners account for 50 percent of the patients at the top plastic surgery hospitals of the country. The sector benefits from a "perfect storm of an aging global population, rising affluence and greater choice in quality hospitals," said Mr Josef Woodman, CEO of Patients Beyond Borders. "This is particularly true in Asia where disparities in quality of care is driving millions of patients to countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, Taiwan - and even the US and UK - in search of medical treatment not yet available in their

homelands." Asia was one of the first regions in the world to promote medical tourism and the number of medical tourists flocking to Asia is expected to cross ten million by 2015! The one time niche market has developed into a multi-billion dollar industry, as health systems of developing economies improve, global aviation links spread, and internet broadens patients' horizons.

Looking beyond borders.Ã?Ã?

Global demand for healthcare services is on the rise, driven by demographic factors such as increased longevity and rising birth rates. Unavailability of quality healthcare in many countries across the world has created the need to look beyond borders. Sophistication in healthcare services is not uniform across the globe. Countries, where government spending on healthcare is less, and private sector has not evolved much, may not have the infrastructure and facilities to support the needs of the population. There is also disparity in the socio-economic condition of the population where, despite being able to pay, many people do not have access to quality healthcare.

Countries like Africa, South America and Middle East have pockets of population that are compelled to resort to other locations in search of quality healthcare. The rise in disposable income coupled with health awareness has resulted in wellness being the major priority. In developed nations, medical tourism provides an alternate way for uninsured or underinsured patients to benefit affordable quality healthcare. Growth in medical tourism sector promotes the development of hospital facilities in developing countries, thus helping in reducing the disease burden. The addressable market for medical value travel is large and many Asian countries are leveraging this market successfully. In recent times, medical tourism has taken a different persona to what it was earlier envisaged. Empowered by information and globalization, patients take their own decisions for health, deciphering how best they can be treated and then choosing the service provider.

Countries like India offer excellent medical services at compelling prices, thus attracting a lot of medical tourists from developing countries. Mr Ashish Bhatia, COO, Fortis Healthcare, said, "A robust pharmaceutical industry, growing insurance market, development of excellent private healthcare delivery centers and good reputation of Indian doctors in UK and USA has made India a preferred destination. Other contributory factors that make India a preferred location includes affordable cost of treatment, latest medical technologies and international quality standards. Weather and cost of living are additional factors that attract medical tourists to India."

Low cost-high quality

MedRetreat, a US-based medical tourism agency, "facilitates the healthcare needs" of North Americans by arranging treatment for tourists' at popular Asian destinations: Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and India. It is not surprising that Americans are looking for alternate healthcare solutions. A 2014 report from the Commonwealth Fund, ranked the US at the bottom of a list of 11 industrialized nations with the most inaccessible and expensive healthcare. "Malaysian hospitals offer the highest quality in the world, meeting or exceeding US standards," said Mr Mark Raccuia, CEO, Plan B Medical Services Malaysia, a Malaysian-based medical travel company that sends patients to Penang on a regular basis. "All the patients we have sent to these hospitals have given us excellent feedback on their procedures and their experiences at the facilities."

Clearly, there has been a healthcare shift with patients from richer, more developed, nations travelling to less developed countries to access health services, largely driven by the low-cost treatment available in the latter and cheap flights. This has made APAC a favorite destination for medical tourism.

Many hospitals in Asia are accredited by the Joint Commission International (JCI), a certifying body formed by the US in 1994. JCI certifies hospitals and healthcare organizations across the globe.

Obtaining JCI accreditation is seen by hospitals as a way to attract western patients. The more relaxed immigration policy in some Asian countries helps boost medical tourism in those countries. Almost all private hospitals in Hong Kong have JCI accreditation. Southeast Asia, in particular, is considered a medical tourism 'sweet spot', with decades of solid economic growth creating high quality medical systems that remain competitively priced. Most international hospitals in Asia help foreign patients with visa arrangements, airport pick-ups, accommodation, travel arrangements and other logistics.

"Much of the success Singapore enjoys in medical tourism lies in the high level of medical expertise and excellent supporting infrastructure. The training that doctors and nurses receive in Singapore is world class. Singapore's strictly regulated healthcare environment, well-known for its high quality and cost-efficient healthcare services, has helped create trust in patients seeking reliable and effective medical treatment," Dr Kelvin Loh, senior vice president, Parkway Hospitals, Singapore, observed.

"Thanks to M- VISA and Visa on Arrival initiatives of the Indian government, the waiting time is negligible to get the procedure done," mentioned Mr Vinod Y R, chief business development officer, at Aster Medcity, Kochi. "This is another reason why international patients chose to come to India for their medical needs."

