

PROSPECT OF HEALTH TOURISM IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

Is health tourism a mere buzz phrase or our society has evolved to the extent that we can think of promoting it in Jammu and Kashmir? In Kashmir where tourism is the backbone of the economy, can we after 23 long years of unrest afford to follow the trend of sustainable development and think in terms of health tourism? We are living in a place where unemployment is more pandemic than disease itself, green tourism gives hope of providing employment through credible and believable means. Health tourism or medical tourism as called popularly is a term used to refer tourists' wellbeing at economical costs. It can greatly change the image of Kashmir in the minds of tourists and make it a popular travel destination again. Even though right now in Kashmir we don't have the infrastructure to support our aspirations of changing the face of tourism but there is a huge scope of development and infrastructure build-up. Though sporadic events of turmoil may initially hinder the growth of medical tourism here but once concept is popularized through campaigns, workshops and youth awareness we can dream of a Kashmir as the new healthcare destination in India. The paper covers a vast range of literature on medical tourism which will help us in accessing its pros and cons and scope of its development in Kashmir. Also how we can establish risk free medical tourism here and guarantee sizable employment.

KEYWORDS: Health Tourism, Infrastructure Build up, Medical Care, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Oxford dictionary describes Tourism as the commercial organization and operation of vacations and trips to places of interest. Likewise Freeman et al (1999) define travel as a new experience that exposes people to a number of physical and psychological challenges in a new unknown environment. Thoebald(1998) defined tourist as an individual who stays away from home for more than twenty four hours and during that time uses some kind of accommodation in a new environment. A person who does not meet the twenty four hours criteria can be called a visitor not a tourist. Lately it has been seen that tourists do not only come to seek pleasure or sports but also travel to attain medical attention. This has given birth to a new kind of tourism known as health tourism or medical tourism. Majority of the research writers persist with the term 'health tourism' to engulf all types of health-related tourism (e.g. Garcia-Altes, 2005), it seems more useful to distinguish 'medical tourism' as one involving specific medical interventions, but in this paper we have used these terms as synonyms.

And even though there is no single definition for medical tourism but it is generally accepted that this term is used to refer to travel activity that involves a medical procedure or activities that promote the well being of the tourist. As J Connell puts it, tourism without doubt is a primary part of medical tourism. If tourism is about travel and the experience of other cultures then all medical tourism is tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We can say medical tourism is travelling abroad for obtaining medical, cosmetic or dental treatment in another country because the destination enables better access to care or offers the same treatment at affordable price. According to Bennett et al (2004), it has emerged as a niche product and changed the conventional tourism and has grown rapidly to a new industry, where people tour often long distances to abroad countries to obtain medical services and at the same time being holidaymaker, in a usual manner. The wellness part of medical and healthcare tourism endorses improved lifestyles. Here 'wellness' does not only engulf medical procedures but spa treatment, water treatment, acupuncture treatment, aromatherapy treatment, herbal healing, homeopathy, massages, Indian yoga and other similar services as well.

TRAM (2006) says that components of medical and healthcare tourism include medical tourism, cosmetic/beauty surgery, wellness and reproduction. 'Reproduction' tourism is one more growing area of medical tourism. 'Birth tourism' is also included in this category. Many times seeking of medical aid in foreign land is because of easy rules and regulation of the host country.

Western Mediterranean Agency in their Health Tourism Sector report has identified various factors that play a vital role in the evolution of health tourism. These are:-

- Getting rid of long waiting lists
- Getting more qualified treatments in shorter time periods
- Treatments that require high reach of health technology
- Reducing the health care costs
- The need of different environments for chronic, disabled and elder patients
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Also the large uninsured population in the developed countries like US where 45.7 million people have no Health insurance. And also even if insured they must pay out of their pockets for many elective surgeries.

Many countries that like Singapore, Thailand, Hungary, South Africa, etc are actively promoting healthcare tourism. Singapore is planning to host 1 million patients and earn \$1.8 billion in 2014. Dubai has founded a "treatment city- Dubai Healthcare City (DHCC)" for Asian patients. (BAKA, Health Tourism Report). Not only this Saudi Arabia has also linked medical tourism, and special cosmetic surgery and dentistry, with pilgrimage (Hajj) visits to the country, with most patients being from other Gulf countries (Arab News, 27 July 2005). India is the latest entrant in the field of health tourism.

India and Health Tourism

The medical industry in the country especially the private sector was streamlined in early 1990 by Liberalisation coupled with IT boom. India has large number of hospitals both public as well as private, which can be the hub of health tourism if projected correctly. One of the renowned hospital here in India claims to have patients from Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, East Africa, Germany, Australia, Canada and the UK (Times of Oman, 11 June 2005). Amit Sen Gupta(2008) writes that India has aggressively started promoting medical tourism. The National Health Policy that was drafted in 2002, clearly points out that government is actively supporting medical tourism. Indian Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF) puts forward that India has been a centre

for healthcare since olden days. Countries like Bhutan, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and many others have benefited themselves from the healthcare facilities of India from centuries. Not only can India enhance the diverse colourful culture and countless places worth visiting but also best in class health amenities with no waiting period.

The expenditure of India was about 5.2 percent of GDP in 2008-09 and it is expected to grow around 8 percent by 2013 (IBEF). The industry estimates showed that medical tourism market in India was valued more than 310 million dollars in 2005-06 as the country saw over one million foreign tourists visiting the country in that particular year. A study conducted by McKinsey and the Confederation of Indian Industry estimated that medical tourism in the country would become a two billion dollars industry by 2012.

India is becoming the preferred country for medical treatments because it provides standard treatment at a very low cost. The Unique Selling Proposition of the Indian medical industry is that its quality is very high coupled with competent manpower and language is no more a constraint in India. Thus reward for medical tourists approaching India for treatment is that the tourists benefit from latest medical treatments at a much reduced prices and enjoy various tourist destinations and still will not incur the cost that he will have to in his own native country. There are Sixteen JCI accredited and Sixty-three NABH accredited healthcare providers in India.

India has a large number of top notch hospitals that offer best in class medical treatments in every segment of medicine like cardiology, replacement of joints, Nephrology, Neurology, ENT specialist, Paediatrics and other special medical segments. The difference in price in different countries is the main reason for patients choosing places for treatment. Surgeries that are complex and cost hundreds and thousands of dollars are completed with best in class surgeons for mere hundreds of dollars in countries like India as quoted by Connel (2006). This explains huge patient inflow, which is obvious at this price point.

The Health Tourism Report presented by the Indian Ministry of Tourism gave a large number of soups to boost medical tourism. Thirty-one villages were identified to be developed as tourism hubs in various states all over India.

Health Tourism in Kashmir

Health tourism even though the emerging global phenomenon is already being practiced in the rest of the India at an increasing pace but in Jammu and Kashmir it has not even in the state of infancy. Not only has the turmoil since past 22 years hampered the growth, but also being the ecologically sensitive area, it is very difficult to maintain an ecologically balanced infrastructure.

As we are well aware of the fact that tourism is one of the important aspects of economy in Jammu and Kashmir and the geographical diversity of Jammu and Kashmir provides freedom go for a various outdoor and adventure sports activities and not just sight-seeing. There is something for all tastes and interests, from the “soft” adventures to fast-paced thrills, and there is something for every level of experience. Even the prices here are highly competitive. The major adventure tourism activities are trekking and heli-skiing skiing in the Himalayas, rafting in Lidder, trout fishing in the myriads of lakes in every corner of Kashmir. So developing the state into health tourism destination should not be an issue for the state if it strives to position itself in that manner, since the basic resources are already present.

It was in the year 1976; State Government under the 5th and 6th plan grants established an institute for medical research and specialities and called it Sheri Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences in the honour of the visionary who thought of establishing an institute on lines of AIIMS in Delhi. By an Act of Legislature on 19th August 1983, Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences was granted a Deemed University status. It was the beginning of medical

tourism in Jammu and Kashmir. But the turmoil of long years has hampered the growth of not only medical tourism but of tourism as well. A large number of hospitals both in private and public sector have mushroomed during these years. But unfortunately none has even thought of attracting tourists for medical treatment, which is very unfortunate.

Jammu and Kashmir which could have been the next Kerala of India in terms of providing medical aid near the door step of nature was thrown in the dark spaces where development in all facets of life was stunted. Jammu and Kashmir rich has a number places, which can be transformed in the world class health resorts. Our qualified doctors are well accepted everywhere. Every requirement for attracting health tourism is in Kashmir. But we have failed to do so. Health tourism can play an important role in the development of the state and attract tourists all around the world, which can be beneficial to the economy of the state as well as to the overall development of the health sector in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Since we are lagging behind, holistic approach towards our medical tourism is needed.

Government of J&K is making huge efforts to develop the state as medical tourism hub. The valley of Kashmir has a large pool of low cost medical services and highly qualified medical professionals that gives it an edge over other places in India. This feature can certainly make it the next big thing in medical tourism throughout India.

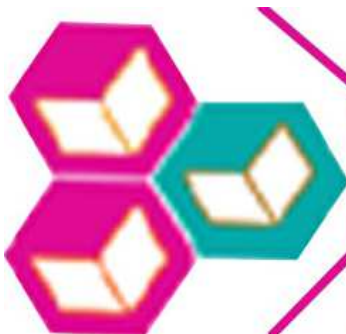
A surgery carried in US for about thirty lakh rupees is potentially done in one lakh rupees in JK. Thus showing how cheap treatment in Jammu and Kashmir is. In the Recent past, Doctors have carried a number of surgeries on foreign national for a number of ailments. Surgeries for disc replacement, Percutaneous Nucleotomy and many other complex ailments have been successfully done in the state, which shows the potential that medical tourism has in the state. Experts also thrust on the fact that picturesque beauty and pollution-free atmosphere of the state is certainly a big positive for medical tourism.

The need of the hour is that every stakeholder should come together and contribute towards development of health tourism. Be it the government, Tourism department or the health sector, all should work towards developing the state as health tourism destination. Media should help project the state as health tourist destination. This will not only develop the economy of the state but also address the issue of unemployment as this sector can be one of the larger absorbers of the unemployed talent. Given the resources that Jammu and Kashmir has at hand, it should have been a health tourist destination decades back. But under utilization of resources coupled with turmoil hampered growth of health tourism in the state. Now is the time to review what needs to be done to and help the sector grow as fast as possible. We need to develop our places not only in terms of adventure and sport resorts but health resorts as well. And may be few years down the line we might actually see ourselves as the strong competitors in this industry.

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