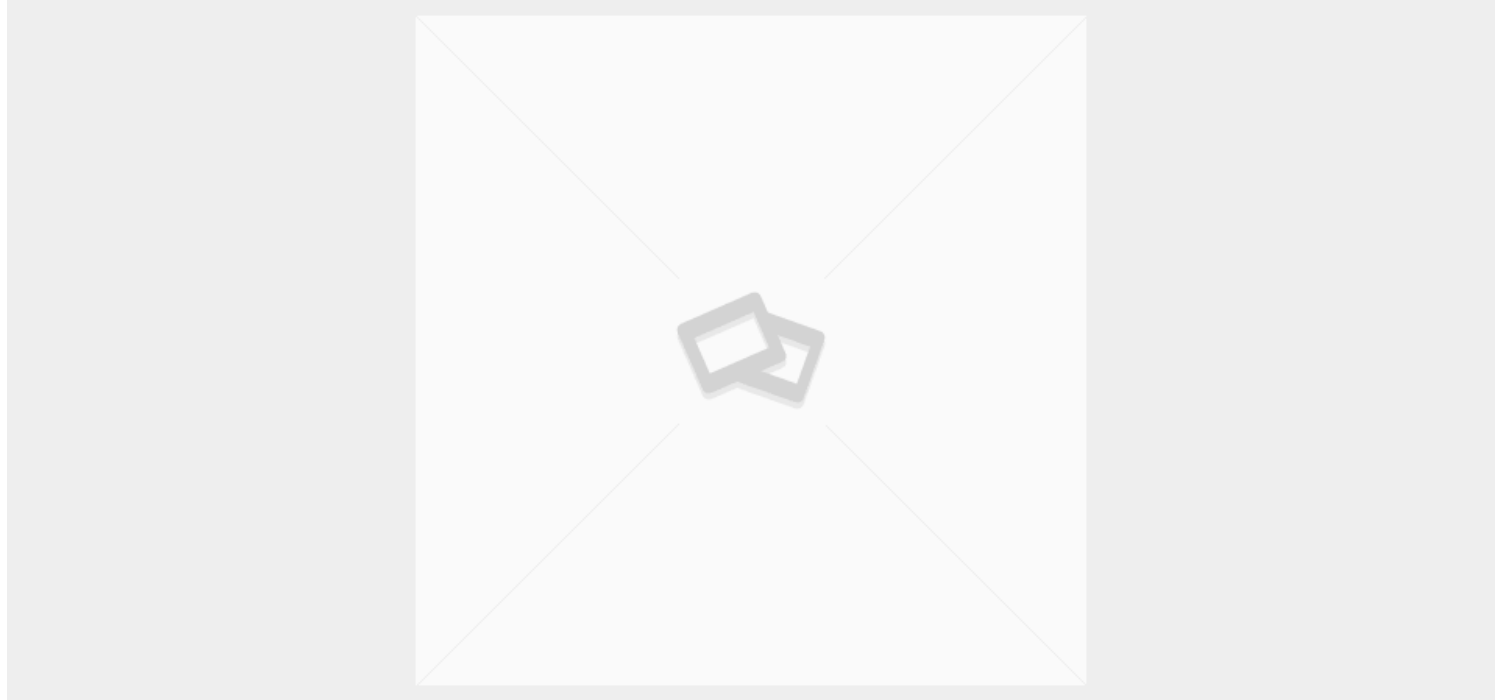


WHY THE MINISTRY OF TOURISM MUST CULTIVATE MEDICAL TOURISM QUICKLY

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Medical tourism is slowly beginning to mushroom and flourish in a complex democracy like India. Geographical proximity and affordability are the factors that most influence the success of this trade. However, given India's troubled neighbourhood, shaky diplomacy with countries like Pakistan and China and changing relationships with countries like Nepal, Bangladesh as well as Sri Lanka, also play a direct role to guide medical tourism in India.

Medical tourism is also known as health tourism or medical travel. This is nothing but the enriched version of the ancient practice of moving to healing places, therapeutic wellness centres, mineral springs, spas and other places. Historically India has seen patients coming from the Middle East and nearby countries to access healthcare at some of India's fine corporate hospitals.



India attracts medical tourists essentially because a lot of surgical procedures are conducted at one-tenth of the cost when compared to developed worlds. For example, the medical cost in countries like India, Singapore and Thailand is as low as 6 percent of the cost compared to countries like US.

With competitive international air-fares and exchange rates favouring customers, medical tourism is showing an upwardly trend in India. India offers state of the art technology, specialist doctors, nurses and paramedical staff who are handsomely paid by corporate hospitals to maintain the standard of care, which by every sense is the right way to go about it. Services range from plastic surgery, hip replacement, in vitro fertilization to rejuvenation centres to treating arthritis and rheumatism as well. The profit margin for hospitals varies from low to high depending on the type and duration of the service.

Medical tourism within India depends on two targets, one is domestic tourism and another is international tourism. Domestic tourism seeks clients from regions where healthcare delivery is pro-poor and otherwise where healthcare delivery is too expensive. Depending on the breakeven point, hospitals tweak their services for these clients. The needs and demands of international tourists are varied and wide due to which only certain hospitals venture into it at this stage.

In the healthcare market, balancing the iron triangle of price, quality, and service remains the cornerstone of a successful medical tourism hub. The Government of India is yet to evolve and bring out a special policy on medical tourism which also ensures safety of the tourists while in India, and safe return to their home country as well.

A survey published by the University of Massachusetts found that 70 percent of the patients reported that medical care abroad was excellent and 83 percent reported that they had to take a companion for the travel. About 58 percent did not have health insurance coverage and 49 percent got the information regarding their desired service via the web. But importantly, 81 percent said that a foreign hospital accreditation was very important for them to be comfortable in selecting the hospital of their choice. International hospitals seeking foreign tourists have to fulfil a very stringent process by the Joint Commission International in order to be certified as a top healthcare provider.

Until now, insurance companies have done very little to steer and broker the medical tourist market and take responsibility for it. Some obvious concerns which insurance companies might have is quality care assurance on foreign soil and governmental regulations which can be a big hindrance, in addition to local malpractice and their reporting can always be a concern. Nevertheless, thinking solutions in this direction would not be a bad idea for insurance companies given the times we live in, also to have regulatory checks and balances to safeguard cliental concerns.

As more hospitals in India become desirous to venture into medical tourism, follow-up care post-surgical and cosmetic procedures become a challenge later. Hospitals will have to have local tie-ups in the countries from where their medical tourists originate for medical tourism to be mainstreamed actively. A wise man once said, your network is your net worth. This is the dictum hospitals in the trade will have to adhere to.

In 2003, the then Finance Minister of India spoke about making India the global health destination for tourists as well and cultivating a chain of hospitals competent to do the job well. While this may remain a statement for few more years, the changing effect is taking shape faster than we act. Revenues are destined to increase should India make concerted efforts to change the tide in its favour. The possibility to do so, remains very high. I strongly believe this is an idea whose time has come.