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Club Medic

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Club Medic

Abstract

For most of us, getting sick is a good way to ruin a vacation. However, for growing numbers of people, needing to see the doctors the whole point of going abroad. When they require surgery or dental work, they may combine treatment with a trip to the Taj Mahal, A photo safari on the African veldt, or a stay at a luxury hotel- or at a hospital that feels like one – all at bargain-basement prices. This is medical tourism, and it is one of the hottest niche markets in the hospitality industry.

Club Medic

By Marvin Cetron and Frederick J. DeMicco

For most of us, getting sick is a good way to ruin a vacation. However, for growing numbers of people, needing to see the doctor is the whole point of going abroad. When they require surgery or dental work, they may combine treatment with a trip to the Taj Mahal, a photo safari on the African veldt, or a stay at a luxury hotel—or at a hospital that feels like one—all at bargain-basement prices. This is medical tourism, and it is one of the hottest niche markets in the hospitality industry.

Introduction

Medical tourists have good cause to seek out care far from home. In some regions, state-of-the-art medical facilities are hard to come by, if they exist at all. For that reason, patients throughout the Middle East are traveling to Jordan or Asia for complicated surgery.

In other countries, the public health care system is so overburdened that it can take years to get needed care. In Britain or Canada, the waiting list for a hip replacement can be a year or more long. And as Dr. Prathap Reddy, the Boston-trained founder of the Apollo Hospitals chain in India, comments, "If you wait six months for a heart bypass, you may not need it anymore." In Bangkok or Bangalore, you can be in the operating room the morning after you get off the plane.

But for most people, the real attraction is price. The cost of surgery in India, Thailand, or South Africa can be one-tenth of rates in the United States or Western Europe, and sometimes even less. A heart-valve replacement that would cost \$200,000 or more in the U.S. goes for \$10,000 in India, including round-trip air fare and a brief vacation; a metal-free dental bridge worth \$5,500 in the States costs \$500. In Thailand, a knee replacement with six days of physical therapy costs about \$5,000, one-fifth the American price; Lasik eye surgery worth \$3,700 is available for only \$730. And a full facelift that would cost \$20,000 in the U.S. runs about \$1,250 in South Africa.

Inferior medical care would not be worth having at any price, and some skeptics warn that Third-World surgery cannot be as good as that available in the United States. In fact, there have been cases of botched plastic surgery, particularly from Mexican clinics in the days before anyone figured out what a gold mine cheap, high-quality care could be for the developing countries. Of course, botched surgery occurs in the United States as well!

Yet, the hospitals and clinics that cater to the tourist market often are among the best in the world. Many are staffed by physicians trained at major medical centers in America and Europe. Bangkok's Bumrungrad hospital has over 200 surgeons who are board-certified in the United States. One of Singapore's major hospitals is a branch of the prestigious Johns Hopkins University, in Bethesda, MD. In a field where experience is as important as technology, Escorts Heart Institute and Research Center, in Delhi and Faridabad, carries out nearly 15,000 heart operations every year. Its death rate among patients during surgery is only 0.8 percent, less than half that of most major hospitals in the United States.

In some areas, these clinics are backed by sophisticated research infrastructures. India is one of the world's leading centers for biotechnology research, while both India and South Korea are pushing ahead with stem cell research at a level approached only in Britain.

Skilled doctors and state-of-the-art equipment are not the only benefits offered by medical centers specializing in foreign patients. In many, the doctors are supported by more registered nurses per patient than any Western facility could offer. Some facilities provide single-patient rooms that look more like a four-star hotel, with a nurse dedicated to each patient 24 hours a day. Some assign patients a personal assistant for the post-hospital recovery period. There is always the chance for a quick vacation, before or after surgery, to sweeten the deal. And

many of the Asian national airlines offer frequent-flyer miles to ease the cost of returning for follow-up visits.

Under the circumstances, it is no surprise that the medical tourism market is growing rapidly. Ten years ago, it was hardly large enough to be noticed. Today, something over 250,000 patients per year visit Singapore alone; nearly half arrive from the Middle East. Perhaps half a million annually travel to India for medical care; in 2002, it was only 150,000. McKinsey, the consulting firm, estimates that medical tourism could bring India as much as \$2.2 billion per year by 2012. Argentina, Costa Rica, Cuba, Jamaica, South Africa, Jordan, Malaysia, Hungary, Latvia, and Estonia all have broken into this lucrative market or are trying to do so, and it seems that a few more countries join the list every year.

Some important trends guarantee that the market for medical tourism will continue to expand in the years ahead. By 2015, the health of the vast Baby Boom generation will have begun its slow, final decline. There are something over 70 million Boomers in the United States, over 150 million in all when Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand are taken into account. They represent an overwhelming market for inexpensive, high quality medical care.

Medical tourism will be particularly attractive in the United States, where an estimated 43 million people are without health insurance and perhaps 120 million lack dental coverage. The number of uninsured or underinsured Americans is likely to grow quickly, as many companies cut back or eliminate their medical and pension programs. Baby Boom workers who find themselves with little or no health care coverage will welcome any chance to cut the cost of care. Patients in Britain, Canada, and other countries with long waiting lists for major surgery will be just as eager to take advantage of care immediately available a plane-flight from home.

Here are the largest players in the global medical tourism industry

Thailand got its start in medical tourism in 1997, when the economic crash that hammered much of Asia sent canny healthcare providers looking for new markets. Today, it is the largest and best-established destination for foreign patients, particularly from the Japan and the United States. Some 1.2 million Japanese visited Thailand in 2004.

Major centers for medical tourism are Bangkok and Phuket. No fewer than six medical facilities in Bangkok have hospital accreditation from the United States. Bumrungrad Hospital alone sees 850,000 patients per year, 40 percent of them from abroad. As in most tourist-oriented medical communities, the major attractions are cosmetic surgery and dental treatments. However, eye surgery, kidney dialysis, and organ transplantation all are among the most common specialties sought by medical vacationers in Thailand. When not pinned down by medical treatments or recovery, patients usually spend their time shopping or in local sight-seeing.

Yet, for vacation possibilities Phuket is clearly your destination. With some of the most spectacular beaches and shorefront scenery on the planet. The mess left by last December's tsunami has been cleared, and the beaches reportedly are cleaner than at any time in a decade. For a few patients, Phuket has another attraction as well: In all the world, Bangkok Phuket Hospital probably is the place to go for sex-change surgery. In fact, that is one of the top ten procedures for which patients visit Thailand.

India is a relative newcomer to medical tourism, but it is quickly catching up to Thailand. Just two years ago, McKinsey predicted that the number of foreign patients seeking care in India would grow by 15 percent per year. The most recent estimates say the growth rate is already 30 percent.

It helps a lot that English is one of the many native languages in India, and the one spoken by all educated Indians, but there are other reasons for this country's popularity among medical tourists.

An obvious one is the cost of care, which for many procedures is the lowest in the world. Trips for follow-up care also are relatively cheap, because Air India subsidizes them with frequent flyer miles.

Another is the range of high-level services available in such a large, technologically advanced country. There are top-notch centers for open heart surgery, pediatric heart surgery, hip and knee replacement, cosmetic surgery, dentistry, bone marrow transplants, cancer therapy, and just about any other specialty a patient could need.

Many of those centers are among the best in the world. Virtually all are equipped with the latest electronic and medical diagnostic equipment—and India, unlike virtually any of its competitors in this market, has the technological sophistication and infrastructure to maintain it. Additionally, Indian pharmaceuticals meet the stringent requirements of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, while its quality of care also is up to American standards. Most also provide accommodations that could be mistaken for five-star hotels.

Some Indian medical centers even provide services that are uncommon elsewhere. For example, instead of having the entire hip joint replaced, patients can undergo “hip resurfacing,” in which damaged bone is scraped away and replaced with chrome alloy. The result is a smoothly functioning joint with less trauma and recovery time than total replacement, and at lower cost. The operation is well tested and highly successful, but has not yet been approved in the United States.

Unlike some of its competitors, India offers a high degree of transparency. Visitors need not worry about unexpected problems with their funds or legal status.

Of course, before surgery or after, India has a broad array of unique and exotic destinations for Western tourists. From a peaceful tour of the Taj Mahal to a half-day safari in the White Tiger-Bandhavgarh National Park, shopping for handicrafts in the tribal villages of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, or skin-diving in the Indian Ocean, this 4,000 year-old civilization has something to offer for anyone who visits.

Costa Rica has ecological wonders found in few other lands, from some of the largest, best protected rain forests in Central America to the fire show of the Arenal Volcano. And for those of more urban tastes, the casinos of San Jose, Puntarenas, and Guanacaste provide all the action even a jaded Las Vegas regular could ever want.

But for North American patients, what Costa Rica really offers is inexpensive, high-quality medical care in their back yard. For plastic surgery, prices average roughly one-third those in the United States—not the prices they would find in India or Thailand, but a lot closer to home for medical vacationers with limited travel budgets.

Cosmetic surgery and dental work are clearly the specialties here. Get a facelift, and chill on the beach until the bruises go away, and the folks at home will never quite be sure why you suddenly look so good.

South Africa is the place to go for sun, surf, and surgery within easy reach of lions, elephants, or just the beaches of the Sunshine Coast. South African surgeons tend to be academically sound, but conservative, so this probably is not the best choice for the latest breakthrough in neurosurgery. Heart bypasses and joint replacements are available, but nearly all the medical tourists who visit South Africa come for cosmetic surgery. And at that, the many clinics in and around Cape Town excel. Most provide a personal assistant or frequent visits by a trained therapist to help out during the recovery, and trips to a top beauty parlor to help patients get the best from their new look. Nearly all medical tour packages include the medical procedure, post-op care in a luxury hotel or guest house, and a safari or other vacation before or after the operation. Because the South African rand is so cheap on the world's foreign-exchange markets, prices tend to be lower than in some other destinations.

In addition to these major centers, half a dozen other countries have significant parts of the medical tourism market, while still others are breaking into the field.

Argentina is the fifth-most popular destination in the world for plastic surgery, and the number of medical visitors there is expected to grow by 50 percent in the next two years.

Cuba is resurrecting its once-renowned medical facilities in an effort to attract medical tourist dollars. Cosmetic surgery, eye care, and a well-regarded women's hospital all are among the attractions.

Hungary is drawing visitors from Western Europe, and growing numbers from the U.S., for high quality plastic surgery and dental care at prices that can be as little as half those in nearby Germany and 30 to 60 percent of American rates.

Iran (believe it or not) has been eyeing the success of Jordan in attracting medical tourists from other parts of the Middle East and has set its sights on pulling in patients for cardiovascular and orthopedic surgery, dentistry, organ transplants, and even psychiatric care. Given their share of the general tourist market—virtually none—their prospects for success appear limited.

A better bet is Dubai, already known as a luxury vacation paradise on the Red Sea. Dubai Healthcare City, scheduled to open by 2010, will be the largest international medical center between Europe and Southeast Asia. With a new branch of the Harvard Medical School on site, it may also be the most prestigious.

Malaysia offers advanced care at low prices in a variety of specialties. However, its efforts to develop medical tourism have been handicapped by an acute shortage of doctors and technicians.

The Philippines are still an undeveloped land as far as medical tourism goes, but that may not remain true for long. Bangkok's Bumrungrad Hospital recently made a major investment in the Asian Hospital and Medical Center, outside Manila, where it hopes to clone its own success in attracting vacationing patients.

The future of such overseas medical procedures is clear; more and more people will consider treatment in foreign destinations.

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