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The Moderating Effect of Medical Travel Facilitators in Medical Tourism

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Abstract

Medical tourism plays a significant role in shaping the future of medical care globally, due to the growth of technology, economy, and other global relations. There is increasing evidence that medical tourists seek help from medical travel facilitators to avoid critical preparations in finding reliable providers and ensuring trouble-free travel arrangements. In medical tourism, these facilitators play a significant role as moderator in engaging between the prospective patients in one country and medical facilities elsewhere around the world. To date, the literature in medical tourism has focused almost exclusively on patients and health care providers. However, little is known empirically with regard to the importance of medical travel facilitators and their contributions in the medical tourism industry. Hence, the moderating role of medical travel facilitators needs to be explored due to the rising number of medical tourist. This paper discusses how and to what extent medical travel facilitators benefit the global world of medical tourism. It is also useful to healthcare providers and businesses involved in this industry as well as future researchers.

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1. Introduction

Globally, medical or health tourism has become one of the fastest growing tourism sectors with many countries strategically planning for their economic expansion. Medical tourism has materialised from a broader concept of health tourism (Lunt & Carrera, 2010). Some researchers have considered health and medical tourism as a combined phenomenon but with different importance. Carrera and Bridges (2006a) identified health tourism as one's organised travel outside their local environment for the maintenance, enhancement or restoration of an individual's well-being in mind and body. It covers medical tourism which is delimited to one's organised travel outside their natural health care control for the enrichment or restoration of the individual's health through medical intervention. Growth in medical tourism has been facilitated by the rise of the Internet, and the emergence of healthcare intermediaries or medical tourism facilitators between international patients and hospital networks (Connell, 2006). The global market share of medical tourism is expected to reach US\$100 billion in 2012 since in 2006 alone the industry was estimated at US\$60 billion (Hansen, 2008; MacReady, 2007). Though, there are still arguments on the specific data available for the number of patients' worldwide contributing to the rise in medical tourism, availability of government figures from India, Thailand, Jordan, and Malaysia among others have indicated the rising trend in this industry in becoming a worldwide multi-billion dollar industry (MHTC, 2012; Mutchnick, Stern, & Moyer, 2005; Leigh Turner, 2007).

Estimated statistics by the World Tourism Organisation showed that the number of individuals engaged in healthcare tourism have increased by 32% between 2005 and 2010 with 42% increased in revenue which contributes US\$728.7b to the industry in 2010. Asia countries received 4.3 million medical tourists in 2010 generating revenue over US\$6.7 billion and has become among the most preferred destinations for medical treatment. Medical tourism in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and India alone is predicted to generate more than US\$4.4 billion annual income by 2012 (Heung, Kucukusta, & Song, 2010; Singh, 2008). According to Ramirez de Arellano (2007), investing in the medical industry sector is a means of increasing income for the country, improving services, generating foreign exchange earnings, creating more favourable balance of trade, and boosting tourism industry generally. This has been supported by Jenner (2008) that medical tourism will play a significant role in shaping the future of medical care globally, as it sits at the growing intersections of technology, economy, cultural and other global relations. Hence, this recent development of medical travel facilitators heightened the needs to look in depth into its determinant role in medical tourism industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Growth of Medical Tourism*

Borderless advances in technology coupled with affordable travelling offers have significantly brought advantage to the tourism industry globally. Medical tourism is partly resulting from globalisation of healthcare and tourism itself constituting huge economic potential for global economy (Bookman & Bookman, 2007). As defined by Gupta (2004), medical tourism consists of cost-effective medical care for patients which collaborate with the tourism industry. While having the advantage of medical surgery or treatment in a chosen destination country, health travellers can also vacationing at the same time. As characterise by Connell (2006), medical tourism is a popular cultural phenomenon when people make a long journey in order to obtain medical, dental and surgical services while vacationing. Medical tourism practices depends on successfully informing potential patients regarding procedure options, treatment facilities, tourism opportunities, travel arrangements, and destination countries (Crooks, Turner, Snyder, Johnston, & Kingsbury, 2011). These long journeys by health travellers across intercontinental countries such as Europe to Asia seeking treatments which include dental care, cosmetic surgeries, elective surgeries and in-vitro-fertilization (IVF) (CBC News, 2006; Connell, 2006; L. Turner, 2008). The active

regions and countries delivering medical tourism services include Asia (Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore); Eastern Europe (Hungary and Poland); Mediterranean (Malta and Cyprus); Africa (particularly South Africa); South and Central America (Costa Rica, Mexico, Brazil, and Cuba); and the Middle East (particularly Dubai and Jordan) (Carrera & Lunt, 2010). In 2011, Malaysia received approximately 287,334 foreign medical tourists with the highest patients coming from Indonesia. This clearly illustrates the increasingly growth of supply and demand of medical tourism industry.

2.2. The Evolution of Facilitators

The evolution of health travellers to various destination choices has made support services areas emerge as an important facilitator in this tourism industry. In fact, nowadays, many tourists combine a holiday with health care. Hence, countries that offer medical care are competing for these tourists in terms of price, quality, and package attractiveness (Heung, et al., 2010). As Jagyasi (2010b) pointed out, medical tourists seek help from medical travel facilitators to avoid critical preparations of finding reliable providers, ensuring trouble-free travel arrangements and having a comprehensive understanding of any pre and post operative necessities needed among many others. In other words, medical travel facilitators act as a one-stop solution offering integrated knowledge of medical services, tourism and travel facilitation and concierge services forming a three-dimensional support system to health travellers (Jagyasi, 2010a). Although medical treatment is the core product, the attractive hospitality and travel options are an essential part in medical tourism. In particular, medical tourism requires good coordination of the health care and tourism industries catering to the needs of the clients. As Heung, et al. (2010) stressed, the full potential of this sector requires strategic planning and coordination among key players such as hospitals, medical travel agencies, hotels, and the medical tourists themselves. Current data from *mymedicaltourguide.com* indicated that India has the highest number of medical travel facilitators or agencies in assisting medical tourist trip.

2.3. Medical Travel Facilitator Role

Traditionally, travel agents have played a key customer service role as their obligations encompass overall trip planning and coordination (Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998). Although the functions of tour operators seems to be replaceable given that gradually customers can directly contact the providers, via Internet booking systems, the existence of tour operators is vital for the good performance of the industry overall (Budeanu, 2005). The global growth of medical treatment as well as medical technology, expertise and medical tourist facilitators has opened world of options for patients and their families. In selecting a particular country of selection, domestic facilitators or 'agents' for example, Medical Retreat Abroad, Malaysian MediTravel and Co., play an important role as moderators connecting a potential consumer with a foreign healthcare provider in arranging medical, dental or a cosmetic treatment outside the consumer's home country. According to Leigh Turner (2007) medical brokerages such as Plant Hospital, Global Choice HealthCare, Med Journeys and Med Retreat have emerged as leaders of the medical travel planners. From the customers' viewpoint, with the increased stress and less free time coupled into characteristics of modern society, travelling packages provided by tour operators save their valuable time (Budeanu, 2005).

In addition to matching a patient with an appropriate hospital, Gan and Frederick (2011) stressed that these facilitators in their quest to satisfy clients, add value to their services through the entire pre and post journey as flaws in the quality of specific services can therefore produce negative perceptions that contribute to the overall travel episode (Laws, 2000). The services include the entire process of pre- and post-care treatments, transferring the medical records, handling travel arrangements, personal manager or a translator in some cases, or even scheduling tours in the destination country (Gan & Frederick, 2011). These facilitators are aided with support service firms to facilitate the dissemination of information and search through internet services. Studies of Ytterhus (2000) found that this flow of information is often

inadequate and thus, stressed the crucial role and importance of tour operators in influencing how the tourist market can evolve towards more responsible practices and products (Budeanu, 2005). These facilitators act as the ‘pull’ factors that drive medical tourism industry. Due to the massive influence they have on individuals, businesses and even areas, the tour operators are regarded as vital to the mass tourism system, which can trigger responsibilities and actions of other tourism stakeholders in pursuit of sustainability (Budeanu, 2005; Welford, Ytterhus, & Eligh, 1999).

2.4. *Medical Travel Facilitator Services*

Services provided by the medical travel facilitators can be a stand alone or a form of partnership integration. Accordingly, Gan and Frederick (2011) stressed on the common form of partnerships between facilitators with key industry players so as to create start to-finish experience for potential patients and allow value to be built along the consumer's medical journey. Keckley and Underwood (2008) from Deloitte Centre USA further pointed out that medical travel facilitators can be divided into four groups:

- Hotel Groups, such as the ITC-WelcomGroup in India, extended services acting as facilitator between the patient and the provider.
- Travel Agencies, such as Commonwealth Travel in Singapore, provide tour plans and organize logistics for health travellers.
- Medical Travel Planners, such as MedRetreat, Planet Hospital, Global Choice Healthcare, and BridgeHealth International, act as patient representatives in finding treatment abroad.
- Provider Groups, such as Bumrungrad in Thailand and Apollo in India, have dedicated clinical programs solely for international patients.

The information asymmetry via medical travel facilitators play a significant role in guiding health travellers in their decision making (Carrera & Lunt, 2010) thus emphasising the role of facilitators as moderators. The increase numbers of players in the industry have shown strategies differentiation of medical travel facilitators companies. Variation of services provided by medical travel facilitators include air travel and visa arrangement, medical screening and medical consultations (prior to travel), coordinate communication between local doctors and international doctors (destination country), transmission of medical records, arrangement for accompanying companion (hiring personal nurse for care giver services if needed), accommodations arrangement (while recuperating in the destination country), and follow-up care arrangement (upon return to the home country).

2.5. *The Importance of Medical Travel Facilitators*

Travel agents have been described as the most important information gatekeeper in the travel purchase decision making process (Middleton, 1994), experts who are knowledgeable in all aspects of tourism (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990) and as information brokers whose opinions and recommendations are sought because of their high level of knowledge and involvement in a particular product class (Jacoby & Joyer, 1981 as cited in (Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998). As Lawton and Page (1997) claimed, their knowledge and information has a significant impact on destination choice. In addition, unfamiliar tourists and those people who travel internationally are most likely to use the travel agency services when travelling (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001). A study by Alsharif, Labonté, and Zuxun Lu (2010) indicated that 50% respondents in India and 52% in the United Arab Emirates use medical brokerage firms to help them arrange the travelling and booking procedures for out of country health care options. This implies that as well as being the first time health travellers and being unfamiliar with the destination country, thus, further encourage them to use the service of medical travel facilitators.

In a study done by Jagyasi (2010a), stressed that the role of facilitator in medical tourism is very significant in engaging between the patients and the health providers. Results showed that 61% of respondents stated facilitator's role were very important, to them in making their choices and decision to

pursue their treatment in different countries. While another 27% stated as important and only 10% respondents regarded facilitator as optional. Medical travel facilitators not only connect patients with provider but also act as negotiator. According to Crooks, et al. (2011) facilitators/brokers in patients' home countries, in destination nations, and in third-party countries further promote the practice. With this in view, the role of medical travel facilitators have become vital in building the bridge of connecting healthcare and revisit intentions, thus, generating revenue for the country.

3. Conclusion

Medical tourism industry has benefited international patients with a wider spectrum which include travel and tourism, commercial sector, government relationships and international accreditation sector. Medical travel facilitators have assisted interested patients with hospitals selections, logistic preparations, tourism arrangement and organizing follow up care at home. Although the functions of these facilitators can be self arranged by the patients themselves in searching information and booking through the internet, yet the existence of medical travel facilitators is vital in coordinating these matters. Studies also have indicated that patients use medical travel facilitators for travelling and booking procedures for out of country health care options. These experience facilitators have first hand information and network on the best health care providers and travelling arrangements that suit the patients' need. Patients are stress-free and can save time by engaging the facilitators on their behalf. Therefore, the role of medical travel facilitators should not be undermined as they act as a negotiator between prospective patients and hospital providers and the hotels and tourism industry. Indeed, medical travel facilitators act as a one-stop solution offering integrated knowledge of medical services, tourism and travel facilitation and concierge services forming a three-dimensional support system to health travellers. Thus, this paper advances the idea that medical travel facilitators have direct influence on medical tourist and medical tourism industry. Additionally, this issue needs to be explored by future researchers to further investigate on the impact of medical travel facilitators as moderators in medical tourism industry.

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