

REVIEW ARTICLE



The business and pleasure of teeth: Dental tourism

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Abstract

In-vogue 21st century, the popular term globalization has definitely conjured a plethora of development, the economic surge, integrated corporate dental offices, and contemporary approaches to health-seeking behavior. Transnational medical travel, a heterogeneous phenomenon has gained attention recently as a strategy for patients to procure cost-effective care of superior quality relative to that provided within their home countries. Dental tourism, a subset of medical tourism, involves individuals seeking dental care outside their local healthcare systems, coupled with a vacation. India, a country of continental proportions, has become a popular destination for foreign patients in recent times, particularly in dental care. India's accessibility and availability of quality assured and cost-effective dental treatment, amalgamated with its myriad hues of culture and heritage, has exponentially fostered the bloom of India in "dental tourism." Steep costs, lack of health insurance and dental benefits are key factors pushing low-income western world families to obtain cross-country dental care. Dental Tourism companies and corporate dental chains are increasingly advertising "all inclusive" travel packages that include dental procedures, hotel room reservations, side trips to tourist attractions, and airline tickets to lure international clients. The objective of this scientific communication was to explore and address the social, ethical, economic, and legal dimensions of dental tourism in India. With current governmental activities in full throttle, the tide of dental tourism definitely envisages to boost the economy of the Indian Republic manifold. The future is not near. It's here!

Keywords: Dental tourism, globalization, medical tourism, transnational medical tourism

Introduction

Travel has no longer remained a journey, it's all about the memories and experience. Tourism can be divided into various sectors such as adventure, wildlife, pilgrimage, cultural, eco, and medical tourism. Medical tourism captured worldwide attention in 2006, when medical journals began to showcase papers, as responsiveness of the phenomenon in both developing and industrial countries was increasing.^[1] It became a developing trend, and its organization, volume, and economic impact changed.^[2] According to Connell, a medical tourist is someone who in order to minimize his costs of health care decides to travel abroad and becomes a tourist.^[3] This transnational medical travel, a diverse marvel, gained attention recently as an approach for the patients to obtain cost-effective maintenance of grander quality relative to that provided within their home nations.^[4,5]

Dental tourism is an important sector of the growing health tourism industry.^[2] Dental tourism is a subcategory of medical tourism where the chief goal of the individual is to seek dental treatment exterior their local healthcare delivery system coupled with a vacation.^[6]

The definition of dental tourism according to the American Dental Association - Act of traveling to another country for the purpose of obtaining dental treatment.^[7]

In other words "vacation for ones teeth"^[8] and thus, we do not require a tooth fairy to make big bills fade away.^[9] Dental tourism is commonly called as dental vacations or dental holidays in Europe. Dental tourism is developing worldwide, as the world becomes ever more symbiotic and cut-throat, method, material, and hi-tech advances spread swiftly, enabling providers in "developing countries" to endow with dental care at substantial cost savings when compared with their nobles in the developed world.^[6]

A well-known dental tourism destination is Mexico, which comes from its nearness to the United States, from where 25% of the worldwide dental tourists are coming. The second place is joint between India and Hungary. Hungary is aiding more European patients while India cares for the Asian patients, and they share some of the US citizens.^[2] Worldwide market shares in dental tourism by countries [Table 1].^[10] Estimated top destinations for treatment [Table 2].^[11]

The entire world is seeking the east, the budding nation-India and also known as the incredible India. A land known for its spices, rich culture, heritage, hospitality and also for the famous Sanskrit saying “Athithi Devo Bhava” which means consider guests as god and this place definitely stands on its words.

Hungary being the capital of dental tourism, the question arises why India can be the next hotspot or the prime hub for the same.^[11] The perception of dentistry in India has been altogether a complete different picture, the famous “Indian dentist” video on internet sites shows a complete different picture. Rightly said that Indians have reached the mars but still known to be the land of snake charmers.

Objectives

Western people have already started functioning dental tourism in their countries, which also includes few metropolitan cities of India. The country has entered globalization where the trends show 65% of youth being a major advantage to improve the manpower.

As rightly said the future is not near it is definitely here.

The reasons why India is no lesser than any other country, and can be one of the prime hubs for dental tourism include:

1. Steep costs for the treatment is one major factor to obtain cross country dental care, where the Western and European charge double to 6-7 times more compare to India. With an idea of saving thousands of dollars and the quality at par with the international standards. Few patients are in a state of not affording their dental treatment and choose to cross borders in search of care. Dental treatment is very expensive in most of the Western countries compared to this fraction of the world. A dentist can charge \$300-\$400 for a dental filling in USA and Europe while it costs only \$30-\$40 in India. A root canal is \$3,000 in the West but only \$150-\$200 in India. Dentures can be priced at around \$1000 overseas but only \$300 in India.^[12,13] The difference in professional fees of a dentist from the US to an Indian dentist is worth a thought. Dentistry is a growing industry across the globe and more so in the western hemisphere, however, at the same time it is cost wise prohibitive by average citizens due to the expensive dental care services. Dental treatment cost is generally not reimbursed by the National Health Schemes of some countries and is way too expensive for most to get a comprehensive treatment plan. Table 3 shows the price for three selected dental procedures (in USD).
2. India a country where the east meets the west and the new and old happily collide. A country where tourism accounts for 8% of gross domestic product (GDP). A country offering

Table 1: Worldwide market shares in dental tourism by countries

Country	Percentage
India	14
Thailand	14
Poland	13
Spain	3
Bulgaria	3
Turkey	6

Table 2: Estimated top destinations for treatment

Country	Treatment	Approximately saving (%)
Antigua	Addiction and recovery	40
Barbados	Fertility	40-50
Brazil	Cosmetic surgery	20-30
Costa Rica	Dentistry	30-70
Hungary	Dentistry	40-75
India	Orthopedics and restorative procedures	50-85 - for restorative and cosmetic procedures
Israel	Fertility/IVF	30-50
Malaysia	Health screenings	70
Mexico	Dentistry	30-60
Singapore	Cancer	30-40
South Africa	Cosmetic surgery	40

Table 3: Price for three selected dental procedures (in USD)

Procedure	US	India	Thailand	Malaysia	Mexico
Crown	385	180	243	250	300
Bleaching	289	100	100	400	350
Implants	1188	1100	1429	2636	950

Source: Lunt et al. 2012, p. 12.

geographic diversity, heritage sites, attractive beaches, wildlife sanctuary, rich historical art, and artifacts.

3. There is no waiting period, having over millions of dentists spread across the nation catering the needs of an individual.^[9] With a population of over 1.2 billion, there are at present over 180,000 dentists, with 35,000 specialists practising in different disciplines in the country.^[12] The dentist population ratio is found to be 1:9000 dentists in metros/urban and semi-urban areas and around 1:200,000 dentists in the rural area. The number of dentists is expected to grow to 300,000 by 2018 and the dental specialists to 50,000. Every year over 24,500 dental graduates are added to the list. Providers now are determined by the latest treatment methods to provide superior dental care in India to international patients. Dental tourism forms 10% of the total medical tourism industry and is estimated to grow at 30% per annum by 2015 to Rs.95,000 million (US\$ 179,500).^[13]

4. In Western countries, dental insurance is a big thing but in India it is still in its infancy stage with only a few handful insurance companies covering dental procedures, where the national health scheme in many countries do not cover the dental treatment under this policy, average citizen and low-income group cannot usually afford which accounts for cross country dental care^[13]
5. Dentistry is no longer, about a single person, it's about interdisciplinary and integrated approach. Specialist from every field catering needs of the patient and making all the treatments happen under one single roof.
6. Here, most of the dentists are well versed with English, which makes it easier for communication purpose.^[13]
7. Stable and favorable political environment "Make in India" policy – Slogan coined by our new prime minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, To attract business around the world to invest and manufacture in India. The application can be to cut down the prices of dental materials and equipment, and there would be no extra charges for import and export. Furthermore, fresh categories of visa to encourage medical tourism.^[13] Multinational brands to come and invest in India. Furthermore foreign dental chain to setup selected and few establishments in India so few of the difficult to please foreigners will get their much needed brand tag.^[13]
8. High quality of services: As before setting up a clinic the person should have a recognized degree from the dental council of India. Registered under the state dental council, and maintain the standard protocols for sterilization and disinfection. There are organizations available to help in keeping the standard and quality up to the mark with international standard.
9. Large Indian diaspora: NRI constitutes the chunk of Indian Diaspora spread across the globe. With the main intention of meeting their relative and also getting their teeth pampered estimated the number of medical travellers by country for 2012 [Table 4].^[14]

Medical tourists tend to choose India as their favored hub because of the key opportunities in Indian healthcare sector in the form of efficient infrastructures and technology. The health insurance market and national medical systems here are well developed, which is convenient for visitors from the West and the Middle East. They also find the hospital expenses very affordable.

Functioning

The foreign tourists get the information about the dental tourism through websites, newspaper/magazine ads or other special agencies, which all together constitute "dental shopping" where an individual chooses from a platter of dentists later he contacts his travel agent, which manages his visa/passport, travel plan within India, hotel accommodation, to and fro air travel and other logistic support. The shortlisted dentist gets the dental treatment done on the patient, and the travel agent manages the vacation/destination.

Table 4: Estimated number of medical travelers by country for 2012

Country	Number of tourists
Brazil	18,000
Costa Rica	30,000-45,000
India	300,000-700,000
Korea	81,000-150,000
Mexico	200,000-1100,000
Singapore	400,000-610,000
Taiwan	170,000
Thailand	920,000-1,200,000
Turkey	110,000
United States	600,000-800,000
All others	800,000-2,200,000
Total estimates in 2012	4,461,000-8,016,000

The simplest case, the patient contacts the dental clinic directly *via* internet or phone, in order to get a quote for his treatment. In this model, the patient does not pay the commission to the agent for organizing the trip. Most of the dental clinics have agreements with collaborator hotels if the patient is asking for help in booking accommodation. The hotel can help them in spending their free time. Clinics following this model are the least successful in the international competition, as they have only the presence on the internet abroad. However those, which are located in well-known spa destinations, are receiving many incidental tourists from Austria and Germany. Especially elderly repeaters, who are spending 2-3 weeks of the holiday there and during their stay seek out the dental treatment. In this case, the dental visit is the secondary motivation of the patient.^[2]

Reasons for travel

While dental tourists may possibly travel for an array of reasons, their choices are usually motivated by price considerations. Wide changes in the economics of countries with joint borders have been the historical basis of the segment. While medical tourism is often thought to be generalized to be travel from high-income countries to low-cost developing economies, other criteria's do persuade a decision to travel, including differences between the financial support of public healthcare or general access to health care.

The dental vacationer's judgment starts with a health problem, which makes a more or less critical need for intervention by a dentist.^[2] If the price differences among services "at home" and "abroad" at some perceived quality level are important enough to incite the patient to travel abroad for the intervention, the dental patient becomes a potential dental tourist who is choosing a dentist, and – seemingly – in a simultaneous way a destination. However, if the destination has no touristic value as such for the patient other than being the location of the more convenient offer for a dental service, we cannot usefully consider this as being dental tourism. Finally, as in general in tourism, good and cheap accessibility (i.e. mostly air transport services) will enhance the

competitiveness of a dental tourism destination. Improved mobility gives better access to health services for the patients, and allows for a more efficient use of existing medical capacities.^[4]

Although there are certain, which view in a completely different aspect, according to them their coffee might come from Columbia and their clothes from china but for most of us dental care is as local as neighborhood grocery store, library, or community center, whereas many others have an another way of dealing things where they choose to obtain dental care, which is coupled with traveling to another country and such people are called as “dental tourists” by the journalists.^[15]

However, this topic has gained scanty attention from the researcher in dentistry, as well as bioethics, health law, and economics. As it may prove to be an emerging field, this thus requires immediate attention.

There arises the question, which includes the licensing of the dentists, quality of products being used, sterilization, quality of care rendered. Patients with little knowledge might end up taking treatment, which is of an inferior quality, and some might end up receiving procedures, which are not needed, whatever the true significance of the rise of cross-border dental care, dental tourism companies are proliferating, traveling for dental care is becoming common place in some regions, researchers, and professional associations are paying limited attention to dental care shifts from being a local service, and enters a competitive global marketplace of cross-border economic transactions.

Health/dental insurance after liberalization of economic policy, a large number of private offering various plans. Less than 10% of the population is covered by health insurance. Health insurance plans also include dental care benefits.

There is a huge opportunity in India for any country to maximize the investment potential that exists in India within the healthcare environment. IDA will explore all possibilities to promote greater investment in the healthcare sector, particularly in the dental health sub-sector, to sustain the momentum of growth in the country.

Predicted outcome

The UNWTO has forecast the travel and health tourism industry in India is likely to grow by 8% per annum between 2008 and 2016. Foreign exchange earnings from tourism are expected to show annualized escalation of 14% during the same period. Thus, tourism is the key, which can yield large benefits for society.

According to research reports on Indian healthcare sector, the medical tourism market is valued to be worth over \$310 million with foreign patients coming by 100,000 every year, and the market is predicted to grow to \$2 billion by 2012.^[13]

The future

India has the required manpower to cater to the dental needs of countries and continents far and near:

1. Enhanced dental jobs opportunities
2. Enhanced professional practices and interpersonal skills
3. Dental tourism contributes to the national GDP
4. Fostering exciting international alliances.

Conclusion

With the current government activities in full throttle, future is filled with exciting possibilities. India has the potential to drill and fill, and the bills shall definitely keep the Indian exchequer ringing it will definitely be a win-win situation; a happy and a satisfied triad, which includes the dentist, government, and the patient.

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