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CONSERVATIVE OR AGGRESSIVE: WHICH STRATEGY IS BETTER FOR MEDICAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN EAST AZERBAIJAN, IRAN.

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Abstract:

Medical tourism is a new phenomenon in the health care industry. Most countries, especially developing countries are trying to increase their share in the world market with long-term planning. The aim of this study was to determine the strategic position and identified the main strategies for medical tourism industry in the view of main stakeholders of East Azerbaijan Province of Iran. This study was conducted with Multi Design Method in 2016. Sampling method was purposeful. The data have been collected from 15 key interviews with medical tourism stakeholders. We used MAXQDA 12 and excel software for data analysis. Four main themes (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and 71 sub-themes (38 internal factors and 33 external factors) were identified. Sub- themes were reduced to 40 factors by expert prioritization (20 internal factors and 20 external factors). After Weighting these 40 factors by experts, WO was the strategic position for medical tourism (internal factors with a score of 1.99 the external factors with 2.65), of and conservative strategy become the main strategy of medical tourism of East Azerbaijan province. feasibility to perform surgery in Tabriz hospitals , lack of sufficient infrastructure for medical tourism, neighborly relations with neighboring countries and fierce competition in attracting medical tourists among countries in this region have the highest score in strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threatens factor, respectively. According to identification of the strategic position of medical tourism in East Azerbaijan province, joint venture and divestiture strategies are the most appropriate strategy for this industry and it's better to provincial officials developed and implemented operational plans in line with these strategies.

Keywords: Medical tourism, East Azerbaijan Province, Strategy, Strategic Situations.

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INTRODUCTION:

International medical travel has been more recognized with the term of medical tourism that, people travel beyond international borders to get health care services. Medical tourism is a type of medical tourism that has significant development during the last few decades [1]. Many Asian countries, including Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, India and Malaysia are the leading countries in this industry, so that each year attracts almost 3.1 million medical tourists from around the world that, this number has taken uptrend [2]. According to the forecasts of the World Trade Organization (WTO) income from tourism in 2020 reaches 2 trillion \$ per year [3]. Patients in developed countries such as America and Britain travel to developing countries such as India and Thailand for treatment due to low waiting list, affordable prices of health care and high quality of services [4-6]. Now due to the low cost and high income of this industry and strengthening of healthcare structures, many countries interested in tourism development focus their attention on this part of the tourism industry and plan for them [7]. Countries are increasing medical clinics, high-quality hotels, improving health and tourism facilities and services to gain more market share of medical tourism compared to other countries in the world [8]. Iran to solve the problems caused by dependence on revenue from oil exports requires putting investments for production and export of those goods and services that could create foreign exchange earnings. Medical tourism industry is one of the solutions to this issue [9]. Short waiting list, high quality and low price of medical services are the factor that affecting the attraction of medical tourists in Iran, However, Iran is faced with major challenges in this industry [10, 11]. Several cities in Iran are active in attracting medical tourists from neighboring countries including Tehran, Mashhad (neighboring Afghanistan), Isfahan, Shiraz (closely with countries in Arabic area) and Tabriz (neighboring Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey).our study setting is Tabriz city in East Azerbaijan province. The aim of this study was to determine the strategic position and identification of the main strategies for medical tourism industry of East Azerbaijan province from stakeholder's perspective.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

This study was conducted with Multi-Method Design, this means that in the study we have been used a multi-step approach (in-depth interview, the Delphi technique and weighting techniques) for data collection and analysis [12]. Sampling was purposive and data collected through in-depth interviews with 15 main stakeholders of the medical tourism industry in East Azerbaijan province. Researchers started the

research by obtaining ethical code (TBZMED.REC.1395.452) from Tabriz University of Medical Sciences. Then, the coordination for time and location of interviews with key people was done with an official announcement from the University. Audio recording was allowed in 14 interviews, but one person did not allow us to record audio due to his organization's security rules. Interviews were semi-structured and questions were in-depth and open-ended (Appendix 1). Interviews were performed in April to June 2016. Interviews were guided by two people; one asks questions and the other recorded sound and took note. In order to increase the consistency of data and prevent prejudice, researchers put aside the possible assumptions about subject and data analysis during the interviews [13]. In order to validate the content of the interview and clarify any ambiguities, the interviews was listened verbatim and transcribed in the shortest possible time and then was referred to the person being interviewed to be approved by him [14]. The long-term employment of researchers to the topic of medical tourism and employing people who are very relevant to the subject increased the reliability of data. As a basis for organizing data, framework analysis, based on SWOT model, was used for data analysis. (Figure 1) Each interview text was read and evaluated by two researchers several times to establish a balance between the main themes based on the SWOT model (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and themes emerged from the interviews and finally, the sub-themes were put under the main themes of SWOT model. MAXQDA 12 Software was used for coding, classification and data analysis. 38 internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and 33 external factors (opportunities and threats) were identified. To reduce these factors to 20 internal factors and 20 external factors for better weighting, Delphi technique was applied by experts. Delphi method is a structured process for collecting and classifying knowledge in a group of experts which is performed through questionnaires that distributed among the people and controlled feedback of responses and comments received [15]. These factors have been sent as Delphi questionnaire to 25 experts in the field of medical tourism through e-mail, 18 people in two rounds completed Delphi questionnaire. in the first round 11 internal factors and six external factors and in the second round seven internal and seven external factors were removed and finally 20 internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and 20 external factors (opportunities and threats) were identified (Table 2). At next step, these factors were sent to 25 experts for weighting, that 17 subjects completed the questionnaire and after analyzing the questionnaires via EXCEL, the score of internal and external factors

determined, and plotted on SWOT matrix, and eventually the region and the main medical tourism strategy was identified in East Azerbaijan province.

FINDING:

Characteristics of Participants

The mean duration of Face to face interviews were between 50-70 minutes. Data saturation took place after 15 interviews. 15 people from public sector (8 participants), private sectors (5 participant), one patients and one researcher in the field of medical tourism were interviewed. Nearly all interviewees were key stakeholders of Medical Tourism of East Azerbaijan province. provides job status of participants, their organization and their number (Table 1). The potential strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of medical tourism of East Azerbaijan province from stakeholder's perspective listed that includes six strengths, 14 weaknesses, 10 opportunities and 10 threats (Table 2). As this table shows, the lack of sufficient infrastructure for medical tourism; abuse of brokers from medical tourists, weak transfer of medical tourists from origin to destination and vice versa and weak marketing and advertisement system in the field of medical tourism were mostly repeated among respondents (15 Frequency). In addition to receiving health care services, medical tourists are willing to visit tourist attractions inside and outside the city of Tabriz. This requires providing adequate infrastructure for tourism. One participant said about tourism infrastructure in Tabriz city: There are not enough high-quality and luxury hotels. Drivers and people, who are related with medical tourists in any kind, are not fluent in English speaking. The signs in the city are not well illustrative to help the tourist to find his way find (P 14). Brokers as unofficial intermediaries will have much effect to the satisfaction of medical tourists. The presence of brokers in customs administration and medical centers of Tabriz has created problems for tourists. In this regard, one participant said: Brokers introduce foreign patients through relationships with medical centers and receive commission and even introduce medical tourists to the hotels with inappropriate condition for accommodation, these factors have caused the lack of trust of the medical tourists to the city of Tabriz (P 6). Another factor that all respondents mentioned as the main challenge of medical tourism in East Azerbaijan province is poor transfer of medical tourists from origin to destination and vice versa, one of the

participants explained that: Foreign patient will have to come to customs for treatment procedure in Tabriz and due to being unfamiliar with the processes, brokers control them. Foreign patients complain of how to transfer them from the borders to hospitals in Tabriz (P 4). Lack of integrated marketing system is one of the obstacles for tourism development. Finally, perhaps inactive travel agency in marketing of medical tourism in the countries of origin is the most important reason for these problems. Almost all participants had emphasized that, attracting more international patients, needs efficient and effective advertising system. One of the participants said about the field of medical tourism marketing in East Azerbaijan province in neighboring countries: The main factor here that the tourism agencies can attract international patients is the establishment of office in the origin countries; otherwise you will have to go to customs where the brokers find patients. We have an office in Baku, and don't have any office in Sumqayit which is the third largest city of Azerbaijan. We have a person there with a cell phone that distributes promotional leaflets and attracts patient for us (P1). Investment by Israel, America and Turkey in Azerbaijan healthcare sector, lack of attention to the health tourism in educational content in schools and universities, saturation of capacity of public hospitals and refusing medical tourists due to the implementation of health transformation plan had the least amount of repetition among participants. Total weight score of internal factors is 1.99 (Table 3). "The ability to perform modern surgeries in Tabriz medical centers" (S4) and "Lack of sufficient infrastructure for medical tourism "(W2) has achieved the highest score among the strengths and weaknesses, respectively. Total weight score of external factors is 2.65. The factor "proximity and close distance with neighboring countries" (O1) and "Intense competition among regional countries in attracting medical tourists "(T1) has achieved the highest score among the opportunities and threats, respectively (Table 4). The horizontal axis demonstrates the internal factors (S, W) and the vertical axis demonstrate external factors (O, T)(Figure 2). Considering that, the total weight score of internal factors is 1.99 and the total weight score of external factors is 2.65. With placement of these numbers in the SWOT matrix, the strategic position of Medical Tourism Industry of East Azerbaijan province is WO and the main strategy in this region is conservative strategy.

Table 1: Profile of the Participant

Industry Sector	Organization	Participants Position	Participant Number
Public	Madani Hospital	chief executive	1
	Imam Reza Hospital	chief executive	1
	Representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the northwest of the country	Supervisor	1
	Health Tourism Department of Medical Council	Supervisor	1
	Health Tourism Department University of Medical Sciences	Expert	1
	Cultural heritage, Handicrafts tourism organization	The Deputy Tourism	1
	Tabriz governor	The deputy governor	1
	Faculty of Geography & Planning, University of Tabriz	Associate Professor	1
Private	Behboud Hospital	chief executive	1
	Shams Hospital	chief executive	1
	Tabriz International Hotel	chief	1
	Medical Tourism Corporation	chief	1
	Clinic	Cardiologist	1
Other	Patient	-----	1
	Researcher	-----	1
Total			15

Table 2: The main factors affecting the medical tourism industry in East Azerbaijan province

Item	
<p>Affordable real price of health care and tourism services (14)* Famous physicians (12) Having a comprehensive medical facilities in some hospitals in Tabriz (8) Ability to perform modern surgeries in Tabriz medical centers (coronary artery bypass graft, joint replacement, orthopedic surgery, etc.) (7) Low waiting time for receiving health care for medical tourists (8) Visa emission facilitation for medical tourists (4)</p>	Strengths
<p>Lack of specific trustee in the medical tourism industry (14) Lack of sufficient infrastructure for medical tourism (15) medical tourism problems in financial transactions (Currency exchange) (9) Poor transfer of medical tourists from origin to destination and vice versa (15) Management problems in medical tourism (lack of planning, needs assessment, supervision and continued executive proceedings) (13) The absence of clear and transparent tariffs (6) Lack of proper operation of the mass media facilities (Broadcasting, local media, etc.) for medical tourism marketing in Province (8) Brokers' abuse from medical tourists (15) Lack of follow-up and post-discharge care for foreign patients (8) Weak marketing and advertising system in the field of medical tourism (15) Lack of insurance coverage for medical tourists (8) Lack of attention to health tourism in the educational content of schools and universities (2) Saturation in the capacity of government hospitals due to the implementation of Health Transformation Plan (2) Lack of governmental support (governor) to promote medical tourism industry (10)</p>	weaknesses
<p>Proximity and close distance with neighboring countries (14) Currency generation by medical tourism industry and increased revenue of the province with an emphasis on increasing job opportunities (11) Historical, natural, cultural and religious tourism attractions, (13) Attention to medical tourism in country documents (5) High linguistic, cultural, religious and weather similarities with neighboring countries (14) Created insecurity in neighboring countries such as Turkey and Iraq (13) Good political relations with neighboring countries, including Azerbaijan and Iraq (12) Tabriz 2018: Tourism city in the Muslim World (12) Poor quality and lack of health service provision in the countries like Georgia and Iraq (8) The low value of the Iranian currency (Rial) compared with other countries in the region (11)</p>	Opportunities
<p>Intense competition among regional countries in attracting medical tourists (12) Lack of healthcare centers that approved by the international accreditation organization (9) The sharp decline in the arrival of medical tourists to the province and rising distrust of medical tourism in a few recent years (14) Investment by Israel, America and Turkey in Azerbaijan healthcare sector (3) The possibility of transmission of communicable diseases by medical tourists (6) Negative political and ideological attitudes on tourism industry in the province (5) Customs mafia at the province border in order to transfer patients to other provinces (7) Economic sanctions (lack of Swift) and anti-Iranian propaganda in international bodies (12) Existence of non-proportional Culture and customs with the development of tourism (13) Decreases value of the currency of Azerbaijan (manat) in the last two years (11)</p>	Threats

* Frequency of item repetition by participants

Table 3: Weight Score of internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) medical tourism in East Azerbaijan Province

Rate	Weight Score	Rank	Weight	Internal Factors
3	.177	3.22	.055	S1
4	.130	3.11	.042	S2
2	.206	3.33	.062	S3
1	.213	3.55	.06	S4
5	.123	3	.041	S5
6	.09	3	.03	S6
				Weaknesses
10	.06	1	.06	W1
1	.109	1.44	.076	W2
9	.065	1.88	.035	W3
5	.077	1.55	.05	W4
7	.074	1.33	.056	W5
2	.106	1.66	.064	W6
8	.069	1.55	.045	W7
6	.076	1.22	.063	W8
8	.069	1.55	.045	W9
3	.083	1.55	.054	W10
7	.074	1.77	.042	W11
11	.059	1.66	.036	W12
11	.059	1.44	.041	W13
4	.080	1.88	.043	W14
	1.99		1	The total weighted scores of internal factors (IFE)

Table 4: Weight Score of external factors (opportunities and threats) medical tourism in East Azerbaijan province

Rate	Weight Score	Rank	Weight	External factors (Opportunities)
1	.267	3.66	.073	O1
4	.173	3.33	.052	O2
3	.179	3.33	.054	O3
6	.135	2.88	.047	O4
2	.233	3.77	.062	O5
5	.146	3.11	.047	O6
7	.132	3	.044	O7
8	.113	2.77	.041	O8
8	.113	2.77	.041	O9
5	.146	3.11	.047	O10
				Threats
1	.135	2.55	.053	T1
8	.077	1.77	.044	T2
4	.108	2	.054	T3
3	.111	2.33	.048	T4
7	.084	2.11	.04	T5
9	.071	1.55	.046	T6
5	.103	1.88	.055	T7
3	.111	2.11	.053	T8
6	.097	2.11	.046	T9
2	.123	2.33	.053	T10
	2.65		1	The total weighted scores of external factors (EFE)

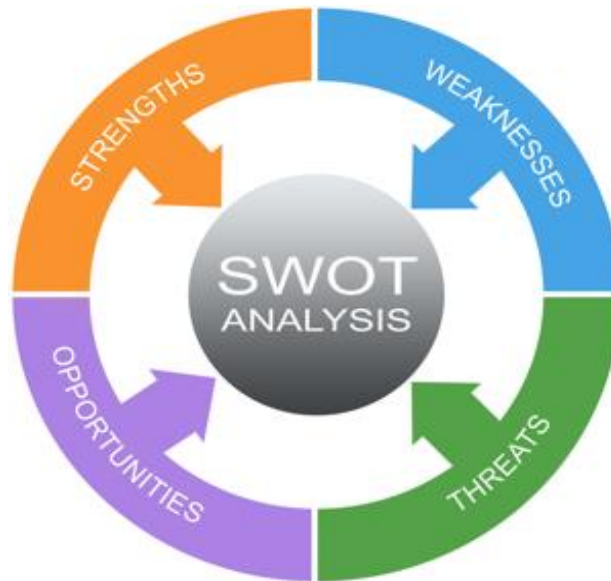


Fig 1: SWOT Model

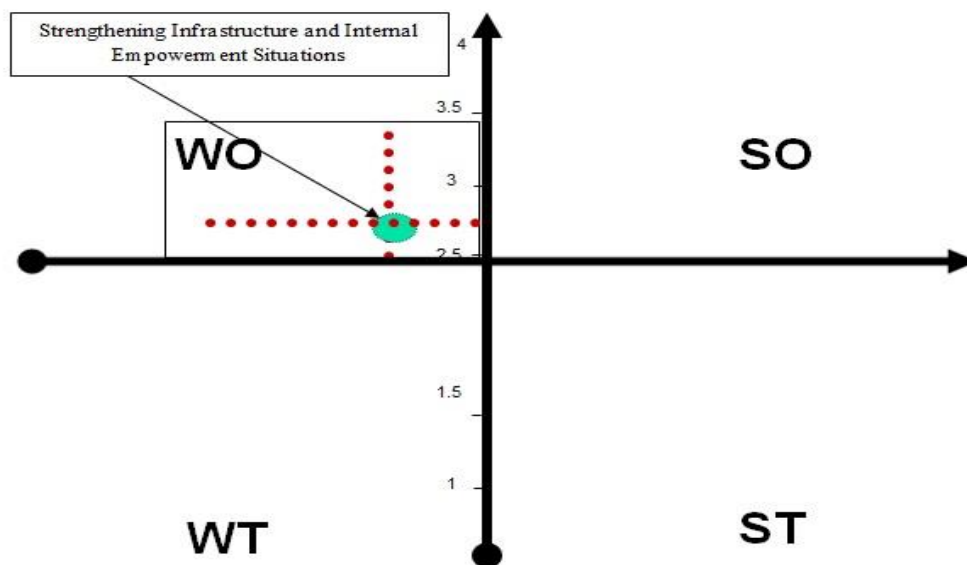


Fig 2: The strategic Situations of the medical tourism industry in East Azerbaijan province

DISCUSSION:

Medical tourism is a growing industry in the world and especially in Asia [16]. Many countries in Asia have begun to invest in this industry and have reached significant economical results. Iran and especially East Azerbaijan province due to geographical location, natural attractions and experienced physicians are potentially susceptible for

investment in this industry. The results of our study that aimed to determine the strategic position of medical tourism in the North West of Iran revealed that, in terms of medical tourism, this province set in the WO position of SWOT matrix. Placement in this position means that medical tourism in East Azerbaijan province is faced with potential

opportunities in terms of internal weaknesses and the external factors. Based on the results presented in Table 2, according to the participant's perspective, the most important strengths in this sector are affordable prices of healthcare and tourism services, famous physicians, having comprehensive medical facilities and low waiting time to receive health care services for tourists. Ricafort, et al In another study, presented the factors such reputable and well-known physicians, offering comprehensive medical services, high technology of medical equipment, acceptance of foreign insurance, acceptable treatment costs, low waiting time for receiving treatment process and international accreditation of medical centers as factors that affecting the choice of medical tourists in Thailand which is consistent with our results. But two factors include international insurance acceptance and accreditation of health centers, have been proposed as challenges in our study and are not consistent with our results [17]. Of the weaknesses mentioned for medical tourism in our study, several items such as abuse from medical tourists by brokers, corresponding to the results of Alsharif, et al [18]; the lack of sufficient infrastructure for medical tourism corresponding to the study of Heung, et al [14]; poor transfer of medical tourists from the origin and vice versa, corresponding with the study of Jabbari, et al [10]; lack of certain trustee for tourism industry in the province corresponding to the study conducted by Izadi, et al [19] and the weakness of the marketing system and advertising programs corresponding with Heung, et al [14]. In terms of opportunities the most important items were proximity and close distance with neighboring countries, similarities in language, culture, religion and weather with these countries, historical, natural, religious and cultural tourism attractions which are consistent with the study of Sheikholeslami, et al [20] and some insecurities in neighboring countries corresponding with the study of Gür Omay, et al [21]. Finally the most important threats of medical tourism were culture and customs proportion to the development of tourism, intense competition among regional countries in attracting medical tourism and economic and anti-Iranian sanctions in international forums corresponding with the study of Ghanbari, et al [22]. The sharp decline in tourist's entrance compared to previous years and rising distrust to medical tourists in recent years is not consistent with Remya study in 2015, the number of medical tourists has increased in India because of observation of the international standards [23]. According to Table 3 and 4, the total weight score of internal and external factors are 1.99 and 2.65, respectively which determines the position of WO (Figure 2) for the province's medical tourism. In such a position different strategies in different contexts

have been mentioned of which the strategies of joint venture, divestiture, market development, market penetration and product development can be noted [24]. Considering the results of this study and given the weaknesses, strengths, opportunities and threats it seems that, the strategies of joint venture and divestiture are better strategies in the first place and then, the strategies of market development, market penetration can be used. Using the strategy of joint venture in this province, the connection with other regional countries can be established in the field of medical tourism industry and through the existing strengths can be overcome weaknesses. Given that countries such as Turkey and Azerbaijan take appropriate measures in this regard, cooperation with these countries can help to empower this province in the field of medical tourism. This joint venture can be in the field of creating shared medical tourism companies with neighboring countries in order of patient transmission. Joint venture in medical tourism exists in many countries for examples, international exchange of patients between the UAE and America [25]. Also mutual cooperation through mass media and the use of advertisement in target countries to advertise medical tourism will be beneficial. On the one hand, considering the insurance problems for medical tourists, creation of medical insurance or accepting international insurance between countries can be another useful strategy. Using the divestiture strategy and considering the results of previous studies, the private sector has higher ability for attracting medical tourists; therefore the divestiture of these services by the public sector to the private sector can help to promote this industry. Several studies have shown that when private sector is responsible for providing services to medical tourists, it has facilitated the provision of services and also, the satisfaction of service receivers has increased [1, 20, 26-28]. Following these strategies and implementing them in later steps, market development can be considered, because medical tourism as an untapped market in this area has high potential for currency collection and on the other hand, the human and financial resources are available to provide these services. After these stages, market penetration strategy can be useful because with appropriate planning and creating competitive advantages, market share of competitor countries can be acquired. In this regard, the province of East Azarbaijan with a competitive advantage in Cardiovascular and Orthopedic Surgeries can attract this part of medical tourists.

CONCLUSION:

Recognizing the strategic position of medical tourism in the province can provide proper planning to

achieve share of medical tourism in the region. Expert manpower, high-quality services, improved infrastructure, a positive attitude of the authorities and rules written in support of the medical tourism industry are required to promote medical tourism in the province. Due to the placement of medical tourism in East Azerbaijan province in the WO position, joint venture and divestiture strategy is the best strategies for development of medical tourism in East Azerbaijan province and in this respect; provincial officials should develop and implement action plans in line with these strategies.

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues (Including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsifications, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, etc.) have been completely observed by the authors.

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