

DENTAL TOURISM: A Twist in the Trend

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India, a country rich in beauty, culture and heritage has emerged as a strong contender for medical tourism, given its historical reputation of providing the world with highly skilled man-power including doctors, engineers and computer professionals etc. Advanced medical treatment needs are available in India as per international standards of care at nearly one tenth of their costs in developed nations.

Facts & Figures¹

- India ranks 2nd in medical tourism.
- In 2007, 4.5 lac patients visited India from other countries against topper Thailand's 12 lac.
- \$2 billion industry by 2012 (from \$350 million in 2006) with expected growth rate 30%.
- Over 1, 50000 medical tourists travelled to India in 2002 bringing in earnings of \$300 million.
- Treatment cost in India is 20% of the average cost incurred in US.
- The number of dental surgeons registered in India stood at 73,271, against a requirement for 282,130 in 2007.

'Dental Tourism has been acknowledged due to the huge difference in treatment costs between developed and developing nations & it is not surprising to find dental patients in greater numbers from developed nations, seeking standardised dental treatments from highly qualified dentists in developing nations, which was otherwise unaffordable.

Why India² Dental destination???

- Incredible saving.
- No wait list.
- Excellent quality.
- World class facilities.
- English speaking population.
- Access to latest technology.
- Surgeon expertise.
- Personalized service.
- Great convenience.
- Travel opportunity.

Dental treatment is an outpatient procedure to cure dental disorders and restore good health of teeth. Dental treatment involves correcting tooth decay, loss, discoloration and abnormal shaped teeth. Dental treatment ensures elimination of tooth disorders for good health. Many new surgical techniques have been invented for correction of dental problems. Different available treatment procedures for correction of dental problems are dental surgery, root canal surgery, tooth whitening, veneers, crowns & bridges, dental implants. Patients, those having problems to eat, can restore to proper chewing function, elimination of painful gums, enjoy eating after dental treatment. With the use of advanced treatment procedure, some procedural disadvantages can be avoided. With dental treatment, patients can get a good smile back on their face which was lost due to dental problems.

SWOT Analysis of Indian dental tourism³....

Strengths

- A relative surplus in the labour pool due to large populations and strong emphasis in education in some countries.
- A history of using complementary and alternative medicines
- In close proximity to Middle Eastern Dental tourists.
- Booming tourism market with many scenic locations and various types of geography (beaches to mountains) to choose.
- Tax subsidization invites foreign trade leads reduction in material cost.
- Known for their culture of hospitality and service.

Weakness

- The length of travel for many European and North American tourist.
- Reputation of social unrest, violence/terrorism, corruption, and poverty/disease.
- Culture is arguably very different from occidental cultures.
- Difficulty in seeking legal remedy in the event of malpractice.
- Large disparity in system for the poor and rich dental tourists.

Opportunity

- Increasing strength and diversity of Indian economies and many fast-growing areas.
- Many strong governmental initiatives.
- Shrinking cost of fuel (i.e. gas prices) which makes airfare lower and encourages tourism
- The wealth in the Middle Eastern could lead to more tourists travelling to the Asian region.
- Indian expertise in off-shoring of various industries to add to their chances to capitalize on this market.
- The emphasis on education.
- Strong private investments will build the infrastructure of the region.

Threats

- Deepen inequities
 - Intensify shortages of skilled dentists
 - Unregulated growth
 - Increase cost of treatment,
 - Quality of care and accreditation issues.

'Trade in health services occurs via four modes of supply: cross-border delivery of trade, consumption of services abroad, commercial presence and movement of health personnel.⁴

Dental Tourism falls under the category of consumption of services abroad. Due to the emergence of this industry in India, massive tasks lie ahead to synergise the resources of the two sectors (Patient Care & Tourism). However there are issues and challenges that need to be addressed to overcome the roadblocks to facilitate the growth of this industry in India.

Issues & Challenges⁵....

- Up gradation of basic amenities and infrastructure.
- Co-ordination of healthcare and tourism sectors.
- Standardization & accreditation of hospitals.
- Increasing visibility of India on the world map.

Basic amenities in India are not up to international standards, especially air connectivity, road links, conveyance services and Internet connectivity. This gives a poor image of the country to travellers, and also raises doubts about quality of dental care facilities. Travel visa is another critical issue.

Co-ordinating the resources and services of two unrelated sectors (Patient Care & Tourism) is challenging. Strategic co-ordination essential between these two sectors can be done through facilitation by the government. The Indian Healthcare Federation, FICCI, Govt. of India and respective state governments are coordinating to promote this industry. There is a need to train the people of these two sectors to meet the requirements of this special segment of tourists.

Standardization in pricing of various surgeries is required as vast price differences exist. The Indian Healthcare Federation (IHF) has brought in the concept of 'price banding' to bring some consistency in the prices of different procedures. Accreditation will be used to negotiate with overseas health insurance companies to extend their cover to include treatment in India. Both standardization in pricing and accreditation will help Indian hospitals in attracting more medical tourists. In India Dental centres are also ISO certified for the highest quality and standards of the health care administrative and other related patient care services. There is poor visibility of Indian Dental Industry on the world tourism map and poor image of the country in terms of poverty and basic amenities that deter people from coming to India.

' Strategies to enhance the Service Experience' is an initiative to build on the quality of service delivery for the customer can be on both a strategic and tactical level. The functional outcome of the service experience needs to be given equal attention as to quality. Putting the patient in touch with Dentist before travelling would also help to alleviate anxiety related treatment. A clean and pleasant servicescape, minimum waiting time or delays for tests and treatment, appropriate food and other services would all contribute to the service experience for the patient and his/her attendants.

It is necessary to develop a service-oriented team. Personal caring and warmth is an important factor in enhancing the service experience. Going to the extent of caring for attendant is a must for reassurance. Doctors and the patients should not be viewed in superior-subordinate roles. There needs to be positive, customer focused attitude in the hospitals as this is what is going to help to deliver service quality.

At the very least, it is necessary to have interpreters and some multi-lingual staff. The service employees must be sensitized to the culture and practices of the patients- at least to some extent. A comprehensive patient feedback system to guide patients for after care & solve problems, if any, should be instituted.

The customer needs to be educated about the value of the offerings in a credible manner. Reference of service experience from previous patients is a major factor in building trust. It is the satisfied customer who will spread a positive message about India Dental care. Conducting

workshops in target countries, tie-ups with Dental services in other countries, having a presence on the web could all be used to promote awareness about India's Dental Tourism. Information could be made available at Indian Embassies abroad. Locating early adopters, opinion leaders and promoting the services with them would help to achieve faster growth.

Promotional strategies⁶...

- Publish details of Indian Dental industry with core competencies
- Advertise Internationally.
- Web sites List, details, Tele & E mail ID
- Medical Tourism Companies /Facilitator's address, ISDN, E mails
- Establishment of —Indian Dental Tourism Corporation.
- Special attractive treatment, travel & tourism packages at competitive rates.
- Package medical tourism through Travel & Tourism Cos.
- Health Insurance for treatment in India.
- Word of mouth business to change to media driven business - online directory for Dental tourism.

The Indian Dental tourism industry can develop a significant competitive advantage through promotion and packaging alternate therapies such as Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Homeopathy and Yoga.

It is necessary for the various stake holders involved in promoting Dental tourism in the country to work together. A panel of efficient Dentists to provide the core services along with infrastructure and marketing support provided by the hospitality industry, transportation services tourism boards and government. Recently the Ministry of External Affairs informed the embassies of 18 countries, the procedure for 'M' visa procedures would henceforth be completed within 48 hours.

Conclusion:

India has several advantages in the field of Dental tourism. However, this is still an evolving concept and several challenges need to be addressed. Focused efforts on several fronts would be required for the Dental tourism industry in India to realize its promise. The medical and healthcare institutions, the hospitality industry, transportation providers, and the government need to work in concert to promote Dental tourism in India.

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