



## **HEALTH TOURISM: PROS AND CONS**

**Dr. T. Jyothis**

Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Kerala

### **Abstract:**

*Countries promoting tourism are using various strategies to attract tourists to their destinations. One of such strategy is niche tourism, which is highlighting different products of tourism like eco tourism, backwater tourism, beach tourism etc so as to attract tourists having different interests and needs. Emerging niche tourism is health tourism to tap the trend of healthcare travel. Health tourism is gaining momentum in developing countries. Health tourism opens market for holistic treatments like Ayurveda. Criticisms against health tourism can be overcome by using additional revenue derives from health tourism to enhance public healthcare system.*

### **Introduction:**

With the advancement of technology traveling is becoming an easy task. Improvements in technology allowed the transport of large numbers of people in a short space of time to places of leisure interest. Currently people are traveling to tourist destinations seeking healthcare. People prefer to take wellness treatment outside their home country where the quality of healthcare is of high standards and the cost is significantly lower. They may be called as health tourists as their main purpose of travel is for healthcare. Here the concept of health tourism emerges as the healthcare providers offer numerous options for touring, sight- seeing, shopping and exploring healthy diets.

Health tourism is a form of tourism involving activities that promote good health. It is "the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a change of location and residence by people in order to promote, stabilize and as appropriate, restore physical, mental and social well-being while using health services and for whom the place where they are staying is neither their principle nor permanent place of residence or work".<sup>1</sup> Health tourism has become a common form of vacationing, and covers a broad spectrum of medical services. It mixes leisure, fun and relaxation together with wellness and healthcare. Health tourism is also known as medical tourism, wellness tourism, healthcare travel or medical value travel.

### **Relevance:**

Health tourism is highly promoted by big corporate hospitals in developing countries by providing high quality medical services at cheaper prices to patients from industrialized nations. Health tourism is projected as a new segment in travel and healthcare business. The main attractions of health tourism are cost effectiveness and a chance to enjoy the tourism products of health tourism destination during recuperative period.

### **History of Healthcare Travel:**

Health tourism is actually thousands of years old. In ancient Greece, pilgrims and patients came from all over the Mediterranean to the sanctuary of the healing god, Asklepios, at Epidaurus. In Roman Britain, patients took the waters at a shrine at Bath, a practice that continued for 2,000 years. From the 18th century wealthy Europeans travelled to spas from Germany to the Nile. In the 21st century, relatively low-cost jet travel has taken the industry beyond the wealthy and desperate.

With many of the earliest civilizations, medical tourism manifested as trips to sacred temple baths and hot springs. Written historical accounts of Mesopotamian, Indian, Egyptian, and Chinese cultures clearly document bathing and healing complexes erected around therapeutic springs. As far back as the Bronze Age (2000 B.C.), hill tribes near present-day St. Moritz, Switzerland gathered around to drink and bathe in the iron-rich mineral springs of the region. Bronze Age implements, including votive drinking cups, have also been found around thermal springs in France and Germany, as well as in Celtic mineral wells. In 4000 B.C., the Sumerians constructed the earliest known health complexes alongside mineral water springs that included elevated temples and flowing pools. Although many post-Sumerian civilizations probably understood and appreciated the healing effects of mineral-rich water, it was the Greeks who first laid the foundation for comprehensive health care systems and medical tourism networks<sup>2</sup>.

### **Why Health Tourism?**

Customers of health tourism are known as health tourists who travel to health tourism destinations with the prime purpose of obtaining medical care and wellness for maintaining a healthy body, mind and soul. Health tourist is a person who travels to another country with the dual purpose of getting medical treatment, which is more affordable in the other country and enjoying a vacation as well. Medical tourists can be classified into two, leisure tourists who take minor treatment for his wellness as part of vacation and tourists traveling specifically for medical treatments. They are generally residents of the industrialized nations of the world such as United States, Canada, Great Britain, Western Europe, Australia and The Middle East.

People from industrialized nations seek health tourism because of high costs of treatment in their home country. Health tourism destinations provide high quality treatment at low cost, that is the health tourist gets treatment at a fraction of cost that he has to spend for the same procedure in his home country. So person's having limited health insurance and uninsured persons choose treatment outside their home country. More over they get an opportunity to visit a new country and enjoy its tourism products during the recuperative period.

In UK medical treatment is free under National Health Service, but patients have to wait for a long time to get their turn. The waiting period may vary from 18 to 24 months. So they choose health tourism an option to get treated within weeks. Wealthy patients from third world countries also choose for health tourism as they get better service and care from the health tourism provider.

Some health tourism destinations provide alternative medicines and traditional form of treatments. Patients wish to take alternative medicines like Ayurveda opt for health tourism. Health insurance agencies and big corporates of developed countries also choose health tourism for their clients and employees so as to reduce the cost of treatment.

Countries that actively promote medical tourism include Cuba, Costa Rica, Hungary, India, Israel, Jordan, Lithuania, Malaysia and Thailand. Belgium, Poland and Singapore are now entering the field. South Africa specializes in medical safaris-visit the country for a safari, with a stopover for plastic surgery, a nose job and a chance to see lions and elephants.

### **Benefits of Health Tourism:**

Health tourism brings numerous benefits to the parties engaged in it. The advantages of health tourism can be broadly classified under two heads:

### **Benefits Enjoyed by Health Tourists:**

Health tourism gives health tourists an opportunity to take healthcare treatment in a relaxed mood. In nutshell following are the advantages enjoyed by the health tourists:

- ✓ Health tourists get personalized attention.
- ✓ Potential savings as the cost of treatment in health tourism destination is much less than that of home country.
- ✓ Shorter waiting time, the patient need not wait in a queue for getting treatment and they receive treatment immediately after their arrival.
- ✓ Get high quality treatment at low cost.
- ✓ Chance to experience a new culture.
- ✓ Availability of holistic treatments like Ayurveda, Yoga etc.
- ✓ Treated by highly skilled and experienced medical professionals.
- ✓ Health tourists can take the advantage of sophisticated technology at less cost.
- ✓ Rejuvenation of mind, body and soul using alternative therapies.
- ✓ Opportunity to participate in stress release programme.
- ✓ Chance to enjoy natural beauty and relaxation during the recovery period.
- ✓ Can enjoy the benefits of health tourism package

### **Benefits Enjoyed by Health Tourism Destinations:**

Tourism promoting countries use health tourism as niche tourism for developing tourism. Following are the main benefits enjoyed by the health tourism destinations:

- ✓ Increase in employment opportunities with simultaneous expansion of tourism, hotel and aviation industry.
- ✓ Avenue of foreign exchange generator.
- ✓ Growth in insurance industry.
- ✓ Increased employment opportunities in healthcare sector.
- ✓ Stimulus to pharmaceuticals industry.
- ✓ Growth in Gross Domestic Product.
- ✓ Reversal and arrest of brain drain, medical professionals working in developed countries will come back to work in home country.
- ✓ With augmented infrastructure private hospitals can provide services to foreign patients and revenues earned can subsidize poor patients.
- ✓ Development in infrastructural facilities.
- ✓ Increased demand for alternative medicines.
- ✓ Health tourism improves political friendship.

### **Demerits of Medical Tourism:**

Both health tourism destinations and health tourists may incur certain disadvantages. Health tourists may face following difficulties while availing treatment from a foreign country.

- ✓ Government and basic medical insurance, and sometimes-extended medical insurance, often do not pay for the medical procedure, meaning the patient has to pay cash.
- ✓ There is little follow-up care. The patient usually is in hospital for only a few days, and then goes on the vacation portion of the trip or returns home. Complications, side effects and post-operative care are then the responsibility of the medical care system in the patients' home country.
- ✓ Most of the countries that offer medical tourism have weak malpractice laws, so the patient has little recourse to local courts or medical boards if something goes wrong.

A health tourism destination may incur following disadvantages while engaging in health tourism.

- ✓ Brain drain from the public sector as private sector tries to woo talented doctors from the public sector. Patients who get treatment in government sector may feel that they are the victims of medical negligence if anything goes wrong.
- ✓ Due to the use of imported technology, charges for speciality services are steadily rising and healthcare moves out of the hands of common man.
- ✓ Health tourism may give rise to sex tourism, which may hamper culture of the health tourism destination.

**Conclusion:**

Countries promoting tourism are using various strategies to attract tourists to their destinations. One of such strategy is niche tourism, which is highlighting different products of tourism like eco tourism, backwater tourism, beach tourism etc so as to attract tourists having different interests and needs. Emerging niche tourism is health tourism to tap the trend of healthcare travel. Health tourism is gaining momentum in developing countries. Health tourism opens market for holistic treatments like Ayurveda. Criticisms against health tourism can be overcome by using additional revenue derives from health tourism to enhance public healthcare system.

**References:**

1. Benson H, Sturat, The Wellness Book
2. [http://www.healism.com/Medical\\_Tourism/History/Earliest\\_Medical\\_Tourism\\_Centers/](http://www.healism.com/Medical_Tourism/History/Earliest_Medical_Tourism_Centers/)