

Russian Medical Tourists and India as a New Destination

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ABSTRACT

The commencement of Medical tourism in India can be recorded in the mid-1990s following greater economic liberalization. This has spurred the expansion of private hospitals that are equipped with higher technological and quality medical facilities, on par to those found in the western countries. India has been known for its successful IT industry, particularly in software sector and call centres. Moving along the expansion path, medical tourism sees itself as the next highly growing service sector in India.

Today India is one of world's fastest growing markets for medical tourism along with countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand in Asia. As far as medical tourism in India is concerned, the last few years have seen the influx of medical tourists coming in search of good quality and affordable treatments for a variety of medical procedures, making India a new market for medical tourists, especially from Russia. Thus, India is becoming more popular and is emerging as a new destination among Russian medical tourists to seek better and cheaper options for treatment. With this backdrop, the present paper tries to answer to questions like; why does India receive maximum number of medical tourists from Russia? This question leads to inquire the status of Russian health care sector as well; what are the steps taken by the government of India to promote medical tourism in India, what is the role of Russian language in medical tourism?

Keywords: *Medical tourism, Russian medical tourists, Role of Russian language*

INTRODUCTION

Medical tourists are people travelling across international borders in order to avail healthcare facilities. People travel other countries for healthcare because at times it is not possible to get that service in their country. It may be due to varied reasons like cost factor or a long wait and so on. This is happening in some of the countries. Russia is one of them. During the early days of medical tourism, the attention was always given to developed countries. These days Asian countries like India, Thailand and Singapore have also emerged as attractive destinations for medical tourists and seriously challenging Europe, US and Israel. According to reports in 2015, India became the top destination for Russians seeking medical treatment. The Medical Tourism Market Report: 2015 found that India is "one of the lowest cost and highest quality of all medical tourism destinations, it offers wide variety of procedures at about one-tenth the cost of similar procedures in the United States."^[1] Moscow-based MedInd has been pushing India as a new destination for medical tourism among Russian-speaking patients in Russia and CIS. According to scholarly literature countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand including India are doing good in the field of medical tourism. However, this paper attempts to focus on India as an emerging destination for medical tourists especially from Russia.

II.MEDICAL PROBLEMS AND THEIR CURE FACILITIES IN RUSSIA

Majority of the Russian medical tourists are mainly seeking oncology treatment (44%), fertility treatment (7.7%) and a cure for psoriasis and hernias, amongst others. Treatments like Cyberknife Radiosurgery used for tumours, are available only in 2 hospitals in Russia. Other treatments, for example, neurosurgery, some types of children's orthopaedic surgeries, cancer treatments etc are not available in Russia. Thus, all kinds of healthcare services are not available in Russia. Moreover Russian people do not find the treatment they require in their own country. Sometimes, they feel that the quality is not up to standard. According to recent studies 54% of the population actually consider their healthcare service are very poor.

When treatment facilities in Russia are concerned, there is no dearth of highly qualified doctors in Russia, but unfortunately their numbers are not enough, thus leaving smaller regional medical centres poorly staffed and equipped. This situation is becoming worse as these days, more than 60 per cent of the Russian healthcare market belongs to the government sector. Wrong diagnosis as well as delayed diagnosis and medical errors are common in the Russian health service industry because of bureaucratic hurdles abound. Patients have been waiting in long queues for prescribed treatment and quotas for free treatment. Patients, especially children and elderly people are often considered non-responsive to treatment. Thus they are denied of medical services.

III.PREFERENCE OF RUSSIAN MEDICAL TOURISTS

Residents from the European part of Russia mostly prefer Israel at first i.e. 45% of medical tourists from the Russian Federation. Secondly, they prefer Germany i.e. 35%. In third place, it used to be Turkey. Citizens of the Far Eastern part of the longitudinal extended country Russia prefer Korea, China, Thailand and Japan. A survey conducted in the Autumn 2015 Moscow MedShow states that 39 countries were mentioned as medical tourism destinations of interest where Germany remains top with 29% of the market followed by Israel with 22%. Other places include Spain 6%, China 6%, UK 5%, South Korea 4%, Japan 4%, India 4%, Cyprus 4%, Switzerland, 4%, Hungary 4%, USA 3%, Austria 2% and Thailand 2%. [ii]

IV.INDIA AS A DESTINATION FOR MEDICAL TOURISTS

India hosts thousands of medical tourists from the US, Canada, Australia and UK, as well as from African countries and Asian neighbours, like Afghanistan, Maldives, Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and China. According to a recent report by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), over 500,000 foreign patients seek treatment in India every year. The number of medical visas issued by India rose 45% in 2016 from the year before. India issued more than 1.78 lakh medical visas in 2016, including for follow up treatment, as against 1.22 lakh in 2015. In 2014, there were 184,298 Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTA), in 2015 the number was 233,918 which jumped to 361,060 in 2016 [iii] Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and the National Capital Region received the highest number of foreign patients primarily from South Eastern countries. From these, Chennai came to be known as "India's health capital". Ayurveda, yoga and wellness industry in India set it apart from other medical tourism destinations in the world.

V.FACTORS

There are several key factors people consider while choosing India as a destination for medical tourists. They are like follows:

Reduced Cost - India's cost advantage will significantly open doors to the US and Europe over future, due to lower cost than the US and almost half that of Europe. Treatment for major surgeries in India costs only a fraction, in some cases as low as 10% of that in developed countries. For example, a heart bypass procedure costing roughly US\$ 130,000 in the US, \$31,700 in South Korea and US\$ 11,000 in Thailand, may cost not more than US\$7,000 in India.

Quality of Care- According to the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) report titled "India Services Sector - A Multi-trillion Dollar Opportunity for Global Symbiotic Growth 2017" stated that the presence of world-class hospitals and skilled medical professionals has strengthened India's position as a preferred destination for medical tourism^[iv]. There is no waiting time for foreign patients at hospitals. The general standard of hygiene and technology in Indian medical facilities had improved. International quality standards including latest medical technologies and trained doctors from western countries including US and UK are also available.

Ease of Travel - Ministries of health, external affairs, tourism and culture in India are working to increase the number of medical tourists. The government provides online visas, multiple entries, extensions of stay, and accreditation to more hospitals. India now has a simplified e-medical visa facility which allows three visits to the country. The scope of e-tourist visa has been expanded to include short-term medical treatment. The government has removed visa restrictions on tourist visas that required a two-month gap between consecutive visits for people from Gulf countries which is likely to boost medical tourism. A visa-on-arrival scheme for tourists from select countries has been instituted which allows foreign nationals to stay in India for 30 days for medical reasons. Separate immigration counters and facilitation desks have also been set up at major Indian airports to boost the medical travel industry.

Language - Foreigners including Russians are less likely to face language barrier in India as English is an official language in India. English is widely spoken by most people and almost universally by medical professionals. A number of hospitals have also been hiring language translators to make patients more comfortable. At the same time, it helps in the facilitation of their treatment. The Union commerce ministry, along with ministries of tourism and health, has already launched a portal, www.indiahealthcaretourism.com, in three languages i.e. Arabic, Russian and French to provide comprehensive information to medical travelers.

About the portal www.indiahealthcaretourism.com^[v]

- ✓ The web portal provides a comprehensive information to medical tourists on top healthcare institutions spread across major cities of India.
- ✓ The portal highlights its speciality in various medical treatment, wellness and rejuvenation, and Ayurveda & Alternative medicine.

- ✓ Once a medical tourist selects one or a few hospitals from the portal, he/she is provided with an ID.
- ✓ That ID is used to stay connected with the respective hospital staff.
- ✓ Moreover, the hospital would also provide assistance to the medical tourist in obtaining medical visas.
- ✓ The selected hospital sends them an invitation letter which is required to be presented at the 'Embassy' or 'High Commission' of India based in their respective country.

VI.WHY INDIA IS A PREFERRED MEDICAL TOURISM DESTINATION FOR RUSSIA?

Germany, France, Switzerland, Israel, Turkey and South Korea top the ranks in medical tourism destinations among Russian patients. However, compared to other medical tourism destinations, India attracts patients because of very high level healthcare infrastructure, skilled medical personnel and lower prices. Now-a-days Russian medical tourists prefer India because of several reasons:

- Since 1990s, the healthcare industry in India has emerged as a huge segment with dynamic private sector involvement whereas in Russia it has been dominated by only government for about 100 years.
- India has a very high level of healthcare infrastructure, skilled doctors, nurses, staffs and much lower prices compared to other medical tourism destinations.
- With the increasing prices of medical surgeries in the Western World, Russian patients are turning to India for their treatment.
- The overall demand for treatment has fallen significantly for destinations such as the USA and Turkey due to the political conflicts, covered by the media.
- Russian language workers and medical interpreters in private hospitals are easily available in and around Delhi.

VII.CONCLUSION

From the above article we know that India is anemerging medical travel destination for Russians. According to statistical reports from various sources it can be said that India is coming to the fore in the medical tourism field. Highly skilled professionals, modern technology and high level healthcare infrastructure at affordable prices are some pull factors which attracts medical tourists from various parts of the world. As far as conventional healthcare is concerned, India has been a popular destination for wellness tourism.which encompasses a broad range of services from health-focused hotels and resorts, spas to Ayurvedic clinics, yoga centres, and ashrams. But, wellness tourism is different from medical tourism because the former is generally catered by travel agencies and the later is catered by professional medical care providers. In the present times many start-up

businesses coming up which includes wellness tourism into medical tourism to create a larger market for the medical tourists.

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End notes

ⁱMedical Tourism Market Report: 2015 Worldwide Market Size, Share, Trend, Analysis, Growth and Research Report

ⁱⁱ India emerges as new destination for Russian medical tourists; AlexandraA Katz

ⁱⁱⁱ Indian Medical Tourism Witnessed A Prominent Rise In Medical Visas; Chirajit Nath

^{iv} Increasing medical tourism in IndiaMore foreigners visiting India for treatments; Surbhi Kapila

^v <http://www.indiahealthcaretourism.com/>