The overlooked side of Medical Tourism

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Introduction

Medical tourism industry is very dynamic and is becoming famous with each passing day. Medical tourism offers high quality treatments, access to latest technology, best surgeons, no waiting list, travel opportunities and most importantly high savings (Johnston et al, 2012). It involves about 50 countries in all continents and Asian countries are most popular among those. In Asia, medical tourism is highest in India, Singapore and Thailand. These three countries collectively comprised about 90% of the medical tourism market share in Asia in 2008 (Asian Medical Tourism Analysis, 2009). It has been reported that approximately 2.5 million foreign patients traveled to hospitals in Thailand in 2013 and it is expected to increase further by 26.5% during 2013-2015 (Asian Medical Tourism Market, 2015). The Ministry of Public Health has launched its latest medical tourism strategy, a four-year plan to cement Thailand as the leading medical hub in Asia, with a target of annual income of $6 billion per year by the end of 2017 (IMTJ, 2014).

The flow of patients for various medical procedures is not concentrated to one country. Most often it has been noticed that the preferred country varies from procedure to procedure for example Americans prefer Mexico, Costarica or Panama for dental services or cosmetic surgeries, Southeast Asia and India are the choice of destinations for orthopedic and cardiovascular cases due to the high quality of healthcare, and a significant number of U.S accredited hospitals and physicians (Medical Tourism Statistics and Facts, 2017).

Variety of factors are considered for making an ideal health care like Government and private sector investment in healthcare infrastructure, international accreditation, quality assurance, transparency of outcomes, international patient flow, cost savings on medical procedures, social stability, tourism infrastructure, reputation for clinical excellence, history of healthcare innovation and achievement, adoption of best practices, availability of trained and experienced medical staff (Medical Tourism Statistics and Facts, 2011). Since medical tourism attracts bulk of international clients ranging from life threatening disease to merely diagnostics and checkups, it is vital to speak about potential complications and adverse effects of medical tourism for the visitors as well for the host countries

Medical risks

Patients travelling to other countries for health care services are usually unaware of the standard of care provided by the hospital they are visiting hence the risk of nosocomial infections is increased if needles are reused between patients or other unsafe injection practices are occurring. Patients can even contract serious infections like HIV, Hepatitis B or infection with antibiotic-resistant organisms. In most of the cases it has been observed that doctors will not take medical history of the patient which leads to vital complications which automatically increases the expenditure of the patient (Crooks et al, 2012).

Travelling long distance after surgical procedures can lead to life threatening complications like deep vein thrombosis, pulmonary embolism. Medical tourism
also make follow up of the cases after surgical intervention impossible, which is one of the important aspect of recovery process after any surgical intervention. Taking an example of United States where coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) surgery is considered one of the most commonly performed procedures with claims of high U.S. standards an average mortality rate of nearly 3 percent was reported among medical tourists (Zhongmin ,2006). It has been found that medical tourists’ postoperative deaths occurred across high-income, middle-income and low-income destination nations, and not only in countries commonly thought to have lax safety standards (Shulman, 2008). This highlights the fact that post operative care is important even if the best country is opted for medical tourism to reduce mortality and morbidity, which is usually absent in medical tourism either due to medical negligence or because of poor compliance for post operative complications due to return to the host country.

Legal considerations

Along with all the benefits of medical tourism legal considerations also must be looked upon. Legal aspect comes into picture while dealing with cases of post-operative complications; medical tourists are not left with the scope to seek damage under medical malpractice lawsuit because of the involvement of more than one jurisdiction. Proper legal solutions in case of any legal dispute related to medical tourists have not yet been established, thus adding to the legal risk of medical tourism. Some types of medical care which are not legal in the host countries or not yet approved for example abortion, assisted suicide, stem cell treatments etc. (Mabry ,2012). It has been noticed that in such case doctors of the host country are reluctant to help the patients in case of complications developed from operations abroad (Montogomery, 2014). Medical tourism also shelters services which are considered illegal for host country and destination countries like organ trafficking, surrogacy, stem cell therapies etc. In case of post-operative complications, medical tourists are not left with the opportunity to seek damage under medical negligence prosecution because of the involvement of more than one jurisdiction.

Ethical issues

There are various ethical issues associated with tourism which must be addressed like disproportionate distribution of technology to the private sector for the care of international patients; thus, compromising the quality care for local population. Ethical injustice is done with some of the foreign patients taking advantage of patient’s unfamiliarity of the place, desire to get economical and fast outcome hence put them in a risky situation, such as sending them to facilities that do not practice optimal hygiene or safety, providing insufficient information regarding outcomes of medical care abroad etc(Turner, 2008). In most of the situations the home country must bear cost of complications due to surgery which has not been provided by them which is an extra burden for host countries.

Hidden cost

Medical tourism promises pocket friendly treatment but in most of the cases it is associated with potential hidden cost which comes into picture in form of post-operative complications, longer hospital stay, extra charges specific to hotels, transportation etc. In such conditions, it even exceeds the cost of treatment in host country. A study conducted by Kim et al (2016) he found that a minimum cost of $560 000 annually was spent on management of early complications for bariatric surgery arising as part of medical tourism. An Australian study demonstrated that treating an acutely infected total joint arthroplasty that had been performed abroad resulted in costs that were nine times more than what would have been spent receiving the procedure in a domestic hospital (Cheung and Wilson, 2007).

Medical documentation

Patients arriving back from medical care abroad often seen to have incomplete, insufficient or no documentation at all about the line of treatment. Limited medical documentation provided to medical tourists could reflect a low standard of care abroad, masking demerits.

Effects of Medical Tourism on the host country

Medical tourism hampers the health care delivery system in the host country for local people due to allocation of resources towards the provision of medical care for foreign patients (Cheung and Wilson, 2007). It increases treatment costs for local patients due to increased demand, encourage the development of tertiary health services which might channelize the public resources away from needed primary health care and motivates internal migration of health workers from the public to the private sector (Chinai and Goswami, 2007).

Conclusion

Medical tourism indeed has a significant influence among health care seekers due to fancy commitments by the host country but various complications of medical tourism should be considered. It is the responsibility of the individual as well as the
government of the host country to ensure patient safety (Wibulpolprasert et al., 2004). Patient safety could be greatly improved by implementing international standards for surveillance and monitoring of medical tourism, developing stronger lawsuits for negligent professional behavior and better care and planning by governments of both departure and destination countries.

**Conflict of Interest: None**

**References**


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