

## The Rise of Medical Tourism

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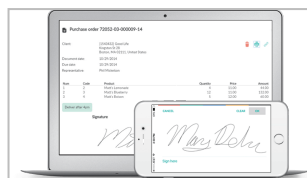
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***Popular medical travel worldwide destinations vary from Latin American countries such as Brazil all the way to Middle Eastern states such as Jordan and Turkey and Asian countries such as India, Thailand and Taiwan.***



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*Emerging markets are new frontiers for patients*

By Dr. Raza Siddiqui

The changing dynamics in medical tourism is shifting focus from traditional destinations to new age leaders that are excelling at their specialties.

For years, Switzerland has been the hub of medical tourism. Patients, particularly the affluent class traveled thousands of miles for treatment, preferring this exotic locale for its superior technology and achievements in medical science.

However, medical tourism has evolved rather differently since the turn of the century. What has changed is the profiling of countries and the emergence of new age destinations specializing in different fields.

Korea, for instance, is emerging as a destination for plastic surgery; Europe for hip and knee replacement surgeries; Philippines and Thailand for cosmetic surgeries and India for heart surgeries.

Globalization of information and word of mouth referrals, especially in the virtual world, are the new drivers of this industry and are changing the dynamics in the favor of emerging markets.

Over 6 million people travel abroad for medical treatment every year. If we consider people who travel domestically too for treatment, the number of medical tourists may touch 10 million.

### **Why the Shift?**

The number of people willing to hop on a plane and fly to a different time zone for treatment is increasing incrementally year-on-year.

This is especially true for patients in the U.S. and the U.K. where either the treatment cost is exorbitant or the wait time is too long for procedures.

With the ease of air travel, patients from these countries have benefitted from improving technology and standards of care in many countries, chiefly some European nations and Asian countries.

Many surgery procedures performed in medical tourism destinations cost a fraction of the price they do in developed nations. To get a perspective let's compare the cost of a heart surgery in India with the same surgery in the U.S.

A bypass surgery in the U.S. costs around 200,000 AED (\$54,644), but in India surgeons conduct the surgery for only 20,000 AED – one-tenth of the cost.

Besides the cost, time is also one of the defining aspects of the shift in medical tourism. A large number of patients willingly travel for convenience and speed. Countries that operate public health-care systems, such as Canada, U.S. and the U.K. often have a long waiting period for certain operations. In 2014, the average patient in Canada was expected to wait almost 10 weeks for necessary medical treatment. As per industry experts, that's more than three weeks longer than what physicians consider it to be clinically reasonable.

A recent report by Fraser Institute of Canada titled 'Leaving Canada for Medical Care,' estimates over 53,000 Canadians left the country in 2014 to receive non-emergency medical treatment, an increase of more than 25 percent from a year earlier.

Additionally, lack of insurance cover or its limitations are also driving demand for medical tourism. Patients in some western countries are constantly finding that insurance either does not cover orthopedic surgery (such as knee or hip replacement), or limits the choice of the facility, surgeon, or prosthetics to be used.

### **Circumvention Tourism**

Circumvention tourism refers to travel to access medical services that are legal in the destination country but forbidden in the home country. This list is long and varies as per country of origin, but largely people travel for fertility treatments, abortion and doctor-assisted suicide, also known as euthanasia.

Abortion tourism can be found most commonly in Europe, where travel between countries is relatively simple. Ireland and Poland, two European countries with highly restrictive abortion laws, have the highest rates of circumvention

tourism. In Poland especially, industry experts say that an estimated 7,000 women travel to the U.K. every year, where abortion services are free through the National Health Service (NHS). There are also efforts being made by independent organizations and doctors, such as with Women on Waves, to help women circumvent draconian laws in order to access medical services. With Women on Waves, the organization uses a mobile clinic aboard a ship to provide medical abortions in international waters, where the law of the country whose flag is flown applies.

### **What Are the Popular Destinations?**

Popular medical travel worldwide destinations vary from Latin American countries such as Brazil all the way to Middle Eastern states such as Jordan and Turkey and Asian countries such as India, Thailand and Taiwan.

Patients looking for cosmetic surgery have dozens of countries to pick from including Argentina, Brazil, Korea, and Turkey for their cost-effective and efficient elective treatments.

Jordan was awarded the Medical Destination of the year by IMTJ Medical Travel awards in 2014 for attracting 250,000 international patients and generating revenue of more than \$1 billion.

India, on the other hand, is registering a growth of over 30 percent in its year-on-year number of medical tourists, making it a \$2 billion industry by the end of 2015. Last year, more than 150,000 people travelled to India as medical tourists. ▲

As per industry experts, India attracts medical tourists chiefly from its neighboring countries, the Middle East, Africa as well as a few European and U.S. patients.

India is also a popular destination for cardiology, joint replacement, spine surgeries, cosmetology and plastic surgeries, and a small number of organ transplants.

## **Intermediaries**

The rising demand and trend for health tourism has opened doors to another service industry called intermediaries, which unite potential medical tourists with provider hospitals and other organizations.

Companies which focus on medical value travel typically provide nurse case managers to assist patients with pre and post-travel medical issues. They may also help provide resources for follow-up care upon the patient's return.

In Europe, for instance, the European Medical Travel Alliance, routes a lot of traffic of medical tourists into the continent. The idea is to make it easier for patients from overseas (chiefly North America, Russia, or the Middle East) to see Europe as a solution because of its high quality and reasonable prices.

Interestingly, people from the East Coast of the U.S. prefer heading to Europe, while many from the West Coast opt for Asian countries like South Korea, Thailand or India.

## **UAE as a Medical Hub**

The UAE is working aggressively to build expertise in the medical field to become one of the hotspots for medical tourism in the region.

In April 2014, His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, approved the Dubai Medical tourism strategy. ▲

The Dubai Health Authority is responsible for the initiative and is entrusted with the responsibility to promote the UAE in this field.

The Emirates is currently looking at building expertise in the following areas: Orthopedics and Sports Medicine, Plastic Surgery, Ophthalmology, Dental Procedures, Dermatology and Skin Care, Aesthetic Practices and surgeries, Preventive health check-ups and wellness.

*Dr. Raza Siddiqui is the Executive Director of RAK Hospital and CEO of the Arabian Healthcare Group.*

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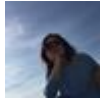


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### Sumit Kumar

Medical tourism is on the rise as people now are willing to travel to different countries for medical services which are not available in their home country. UAE has a place for itself in medical tourism industry, more promotion will make it a hub for medical tourism.  
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### Medical Tourism Review

Whichever destination people choose, the most important thing is to choose a safe trip, with the information required about their destination, travel agents. Thanks for contributing and delivering information to the patients! RAK Hospital

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