

Chapter 19

Health Tourism in Iran

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shows that Iran has similar advantages to countries with a more developed brand of health tourism, including low costs, quality health services, competent doctors, and abundant natural and cultural attractions. The Health and Medical Ministry has developed 6 mandatory guidelines for medical centers receiving health tourists: these include the general condition of the facility, the workforce, medical facilities, geographical location, operational conditions, and the content of medical center websites. The Ministry offers facilities to hospitals and organizations applying to join the medical tourism program. In particular, the progressive provision of medical procedures, the distribution and marketing of health services, medical training, medical products, and equipment, is within a standardized framework of guidelines and development priorities. The chapter concludes that these interventions are designed to establish an effective presence in world and regional medical tourism markets.

INTRODUCTION

Health tourism is organized travel from living place to another place which occurs so as to help a patient better achieve their return to physical and psychological health (Castro, 2009; Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Smith & Puczko, 2009). Health tourism includes “medical tourism”, “truth tourism” and “preventive tourism”. Travel, as an element of treatment and of rehabilitation, is one of the most important goals of medical tourism, and most often while receiving medical treatment, the activities of leisure time will increase, depending on the patient’s health status (Connell, 2011; Hall, 2013). Since financial status and life problems are the main factors leading to high level of life stress and health problems, health tourism is a positive choice for those who decide to give more consideration to their health and welfare (Jabbari, 2009; Ayoubian, Tourani, & Hashemi, 2013; Carrera & Bridges, 2006).

The market for health tourism is becoming one of the most lucrative and competitive industries in the world, and is one of the features of advanced tourism (Hall, 2013). At the national level, governments are interested in taking advantage of the financial rewards stemmed from this industry. Increasing competition among different countries, in particular developing countries in Asia has begun to attract

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health tourists (Xian, 2010; Medical Tourism Magazine, 2014). Globalization and business freedom in the realm of health services has paved the way for rapid development of this kind of tourism (Connell, 2013). If health tourism is considered as a national priority, then Iran can potentially prevent the outflow of foreign currency and trained people to other countries that may occur as the country develops, and possibly attract those from other countries. Internationally, there has been an increase in the number of people who have left their countries in order to find appropriate health services during the past few years. This increase in the number of such tourists reveals some of the motivations for travel as: the high cost of health services in industrial countries, easier international travel, favorable fluctuations in currency exchange rates, rapid developments in medical technology, improvement in the patient protection standards in most countries, tourist access to the Internet network, and also the establishment of new companies which have no medical specialty but play an important intermediate role between patients and hospital networks (Connell, 2013). Nowadays, with the advent of standardization and global regulations which apply in different parts of the world, people are looking for the highest quality treatment *and* low and competitive costs wherever they can be found (Jabbari, 2009; Kazemi, 2007).

Iran, in considering its own advantages in health tourism including low costs, high quality of health services, competent doctors and possessing abundant natural attractions in compared to other countries such as America, England, Canada and even the neighboring countries, has decided to take advantage from these benefits.. The Health and Medical Ministry has developed 6 mandatory guidelines for medical centers receiving health tourists. These are as follows: general condition of the facility, the human workforce, the medical facilities, geographical location, secondary operational conditions, and principles for medical center websites. The Ministry is in turn obliged to offer the necessary facilities to hospitals and organizations applying to join this program. These cover the introduction of standard capabilities relating to medical procedures, the distribution and marketing of health services, medical training, and medical and medicinal products, and equipment, within a standardized framework of guidelines and development priorities, in order to pave the way for an effective presence in world markets, and the transformation of the Islamic Republic of Iran into a center that can assist in addressing the health and medical needs of the region. This is to be done so that at the end of the fourth development plan period the amount of foreign currency stemming from exporting the above mentioned services and products equals 30% of the total value of the health and medical industry in Iran (Izadi, Ayoobian, Nasiri, Jineidi, Fazel, & Hoseinpourfard, 2012).

BACKGROUND

There are now many studies that show that increases in treatment costs in the US, and long (waiting) lists in the United Kingdom and Canada have led to the fact that many US and European patients travel to developing countries in southeast Asia and other destinations, in order to receive medical services (Connell, 2011, 2013; Deloitte LLC, 2011; Hall, 2013; Hashim, Chongsuvivatwong, Phua, Pocock, Yap Mui Teng, Chhem, Wilopo, & Lopez, 2012; Patients beyond Borders, 2011). There is no comprehensive information about the number of patients who receive medical services at health tourist destinations, although this situation has been rectified to some extent in recent years (Hall, 2013). The main problem in determining the number of health tourists relates to the exact definition of these tourists. In fact, the reported number includes those foreign patients receiving treatment who reside in the target country (if any), business travelers requiring treatment, tourists travelling specifically for medical treatment, and

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