

Chapter 1

Navigating Healthcare in a Crisis: Understanding Health Literacy and Medical Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the emerging trend of medical tourism in India, focusing on two specific cases: cardiovascular surgery in Kozhikode, Kerala, and a total hip replacement in New Delhi. Through a thematic analysis, the research elucidates the significant role of health literacy in guiding patients' decisions to seek medical interventions abroad. This chapter highlights several themes. One is balancing concerns about healthcare costs with the care quality in India. Another is how online research and patient stories affect decisions. Planning before the trip is detailed. After-treatment care is vital. The chapter also looks at how cultural experiences in medical trips can help patients. It emphasizes the need to understand and use health information, especially in medical tourism, examining how health knowledge influences patient choices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Health literacy is one's capability to understand and utilize health information, facilitating informed decision-making. It aids in effective communication with healthcare professionals and helps navigate complex healthcare systems (Berkman *et al.*, 2011; Rudd & Anderson, 2006). Factors such as education, culture, and language proficiency influence health literacy. Misunderstandings related to health issues and treatments due to low health literacy can lead to adverse health outcomes and increased healthcare costs (Nutbeam, 2008). Several tools, like the Test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults (TOFHLA) and the Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit, assess health literacy. Efforts to boost health literacy include patient education, transparent communication, and the development of accessible health resources (Lunt & Carrera, 2010).

On the other hand, medical tourism is travelling abroad for medical procedures. It is driven by factors such as the availability of quality healthcare services in other countries, cost disparities, reduced wait times, and the quest for specific treatments unavailable or restricted in one's home nation. This industry encompasses various medical services and involves healthcare professionals and agencies assisting patients in medical travel logistics. When combining health literacy and medical tourism, challenges arise. It becomes essential to bridge health literacy gaps in the global healthcare setting to ensure patient safety and optimal outcomes.

1.1 Health Literacy

Health literacy, emerging in the 1970s, denotes an individual's ability to navigate today's health demands and has gained importance due to the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases and healthcare costs (Liu *et al.*, 2020). This literacy influences healthcare access, quality, and fairness, with Santana *et al.* (2021) expanding it to include understanding and using health information and services for decision-making. Liu *et al.*, (2020) identifies three key elements of health literacy: knowledge of health, healthcare, and health systems; processing and using information in various formats related to health and healthcare; and the ability to maintain health through self-management and working with health providers. The study emphasizes the diverse needs of individuals and the importance of interaction between consumers, healthcare providers, and systems in understanding and improving health literacy.

Hayran & Özer (2018) highlighted that effective communication of health information by healthcare organizations in Istanbul positively influences patient contentment. Such literacy is essential for preventive healthcare, enhancing patient-provider communication, and reducing healthcare disparities. Digital health literacy has emerged with the advent of digital healthcare, emphasizing the importance of

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