



Health Tourism Development Strategies in Ardabil

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Abstract

Introduction: Health tourism industry is growing in border provinces of the country, especially in the areas where tourists feel more comfortable as a result of distance from stressful urban life. This research was done to promote Health Tourism Industry in Ardabil.

Methods: This is an analytic study. The data were gathered by means of library technique from academic sites as well as experts' opinions. Then, 20 questionnaires were distributed among administrators and political authorities of health tourism. At last, the results were analyzed by SPSS software.

Results: According to the findings, factors affecting the development of health tourism in Ardabil were prioritized. The most important factors were as follows: costs, infrastructure, target market, services.

Conclusion: Considering the great potential development of health tourism industry in Ardabil due to hot mineral water, comprehensive and operational planning in this regard is required to push the province at the top of this industry in Iran.

Keywords: Tourists, Health Tourism, Strategies

Article History: Received: 20 Apr 2014 Revised: 25 May 2014 Accepted: 30 May 2014

Cite this article as: Fani Khiavi R. Health tourism development strategies in Ardabil. Int J Travel Med Glob Health. 2014;2(2):65-7.

1. Introduction

Health tourism means travel to villages and areas with mineral water, springs and hot water. This type of tourist trip is made to escape from stress and pressure resulting from urban life, needless of medical intervention and monitoring. Tourists do not travel to the areas in search of the treatment of specific diseases; they aim to enjoy natural areas looking for healthiness. There are three types of health tourism as follows: curative tourism, wellness tourism and medical tourism [1-5].

Wellness tourism is to travel to healthcare cities to escape from everyday stress, needless of any medical intervention. Curative tourism is also a sort of travel to spa, sun-sand-sea, and natural muddy lands as well as others, to treat a number of diseases under medical supervision. Medical tourism is travel to treat physical illness or surgery under the supervision of physicians in clinics that may be used in addition to treatments and resources for natural healing [2, 6].

Today, tourism in many countries is the main force of economic growth and one of the most dynamic economic activities of present age that plays an important role in local sustainable development. In fact, the development of strategic opportunities created by the industry, can lead to the job creation and income diversification [7, 8].

In general, early 1970s, the status of tourism industry among other industries improved. Florence Nightingale was a pioneer to promote medical tourism in the late 19th century. Her patients travelled to Switzerland and Turkey looking for treatment through mineral water that was cheaper.

Health Tourism in Iran has little history and this subject was considered as a matter of attention by Ministry of Health in 2003. In 2004, after the integration of cultural heritage and Tourism, medical tourism in Iran established independently. Many countries have an important role in the exchange technology and medical tourism each year and revenues from foreign exchange is 40 to 50 billion dollars through medical tourism in Europe and America. But Iran in the industry is in the beginning of the way [9].

Iran could admit in the vicinity of 12000 foreign patients in 2004 which increased to 17,500 people in 2005. On average, every medical tourist expend 3 to 4 thousand dollars in the country. With regard to medical and health tourism four major items that should always be noted are: empowerment of medical staff and professionals, upgrading technologies and regulations, implementation of international standards, and reduction of treatment costs [2, 10].

Tourism development in the areas of natural environments, has effects and consequences which brings about a lot of problems for people, i.e. the destruction of forests and vegetation density and increased waste, noise or destruction of farms and gardens. In contrast with these effects, medical tourism could help with environmental protection, protection of archaeological sites and historical reclamation and Landscaping and building infrastructure and superstructure facilities and services. The development and management of tourism in a way that is compatible with the environment which would not result in quality loss, is considered a key factor in achieving sustainable development. Hence, to get to

a high level in environmental tourism, planning and understanding of the impacts of tourism on the environment is an important issue first [11].

Compared with the benefits and positive effects mentioned above, tourism development may cause negative impacts on environment. Below are some of the environmental problems in and around tourist areas that have been identified. Condensation and accumulation of garbage and waste, cutting down trees and removal of vegetation, water pollution and soil erosion [12].

Goals in health tourism include:

1- Job creation and increase in quality of health sector and approaching international standards.

2- Money making and to exchange technology thereby supporting economic growth in the country.

3- To become regional hub for health tourism, attracting health tourists from Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf countries as well as Islamic countries [13].

For the purposes of health tourism in the country, Iran should play as a leader in this industry throughout the region; Due to the high potential of health tourism in Ardabil, this research aims to provide guidelines for the development of this industry in Ardabil.

2. Methods

This is a descriptive and cross-sectional study that was done to explore the challenges and solutions to health tourism in Ardabil. The study was conducted in three stages. First, going to reputable sites, library resources and search for existing data on health tourism industry in Ardabil which were classified. Then, summing up the results of the previous stage and interviews with expert authorities to get basic concepts in this field. After this part, a questionnaire was designed (questions were scored from zero to 10). Professors and experts confirmed the validity and reliability was calculated 85% using Cronbach's alpha test. Then, the questionnaire was distributed among 20 people who were policy makers of health tourism, hospital administrators, and experts in health tourism field. In the final stage questionnaires were collected from respondents. Questions were scored from zero (no impact on tourism development) to 10 (maximum impact on the health tourism development). Data analysis was performed using SPSS software (version 16) and descriptive statistics methods were used. Next, the factors were rated in terms of their influence on the development of health tourism industry in Ardabil.

3. Results

The most important factors in the development of health tourism in Ardabil province were prioritized. In Table 1, the factors that have the greatest influence on the development of health tourism were prioritized.

Table 1. Factors affecting the health tourism industry in Ardabil

1	Regulation of health tourism based on their status, costs, services received and productive markets
2	The systematic process of health tourism through the creation and enforcement of terms and conditions for health service delivery institutions
3	Presentation of solutions to the distribution of health tourism organizations
4	Improvement of cooperation between the various stakeholders to explain the tasks according to their health tourists and coordination of activities involved in this sector in order to avoid duplication of efforts and avoid missing some things
5	Combination with other types of tourism such as tourism, pilgrimage, cultural tourism and nature tourism destinations receive appropriate health services
6	To encourage private sector investment in infrastructure and promoting health tourism through coordination to consider tax breaks, loans with low interest rates
7	Suitable for the establishment and support of the private sector, NGOs and cooperatives to market products health tourism
8	Selection of target markets and to examine changes in health tourism health tourism service packages tailored to target markets
9	Studies conducted in coordination with the Institute for Research on Health Tourism organized by assigning qualified
10	Defining and distinguishing between different types of health tourism (medical, health care), and adherence to scientific definitions to distinguish between species
11	Explaining the importance of health tourism and its key role in the country's booming tourism industry officials and various stakeholders of the industry (according to the country's potential in this field and the challenges that face)
12	Health tourism personnel training, special features of a queue (direct service staff), health and tourism sectors

4. Discussion

Ardabil due to its geographic position and climatic and natural characteristics among provinces, including water and air condition in Spring and Summer and having hot and cold mineral water and exciting cultural and social environment, can attract loads of medical tourists. In this regard, Ardabil in the country can be considered as the best source of water treatment. It is also the province with about 5200 km border with Azerbaijan which can play a major role in tourism development thereby providing health and welfare services to the citizens of two countries.

In recent months, several factors led to the influx of large numbers of citizens in this province from Republic of Azerbaijan include:

- ✓ The sharp increase in the purchasing power of dollar
- ✓ Low cost of medical services and medicines in comparison to other countries.
- ✓ Elimination of visas for citizens of Azerbaijan and stay visas for Iranians
- ✓ Lack of health systems development in Azerbaijan concerning human resources and new technologies in health sector
- ✓ There are a variety of medical and specialized hospitals and clinical centers in the province
- ✓ Cultural and linguistic similarity between residents

of the two countries

Nature and ecotourism potential of the area attract more than 400 thousand foreign tourists every year who are mostly citizens of Azerbaijan and cross Bilesuar boundary. 50% of the tourists and travelers come to the province in search of health services. During recent years, as a result of the elimination of visa, Azerbaijan has become one of the most important areas for patients. In 1390, more than 300 hospitals and over a thousand foreign patients and 500 out-patients from Azerbaijan and Georgia have traveled to use medical services [14].

Regardless of revenues and development of tourism in this region, the presence of foreign citizens in the province, has also created problems and issues that the authorities should take strict action to resolve them. Problems that have been created in this area include:

- ✓ Reducing drug stores selling foreigners drugs due to high price
- ✓ Decreased interest in visiting patients by physicians due to reception of more foreign patients
- ✓ Increase in treatment tariff by doctors because of growing demand of customers
- ✓ Increase in waiting time for medical services due to excessive demand from inside plus outside of the country [15].

5. Conclusion

Health tourism has incredibly grown in recent years in Ardabil. The reasons contributing to this growth are long borders with Azerbaijan, common language, religion and culture, medical facilities and tourist attractions. Ardabil is a thriving tourist area due to warm mineral water. Opportunities have arisen as a result of economic prosperity of the region, and also opportunities regarding technological and human resources in the health sector.

Acknowledgments

Author would like to acknowledge their gratitude to the Islamic Azad University of Meshgin Shahr Branch.

Authors' Contribution

Author confirmed the final draft before submission.

Financial Disclosure

The authors declared no financial disclosure.

Funding/Support

Not declared.

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