



Formulating Strategic Plan of Medical Tourism Development

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Abstract

Introduction: Medical tourism is the travel of patients to outside the area of life to benefit from hospitals and medical services or some particular treatment or periodic test of physical conditions. This study has been done with the purpose of formulating a strategic plan of medical tourism development of Ahwaz city.

Methods: The method of this research is a descriptive-analytical one that has been done by using a field of work and strategic planning methods for performing a backup analysis and delivering policies and strategies.

Results: The results of the research indicates 16 strength points against 12 weakness points that results in earning the final score of 2.44 from the internal factors. Also, the numbers of 10 opportunities again 10 threats are recognized in related to medical tourism development of Ahwaz city. This has eventually led into earning a total final score of 2.8 from the external factors for medical tourism development of Ahwaz city.

Conclusion: The results of applying the strategic planning method indicated that the city of this case study is having relatively higher opportunities and strengths in compared to the weakness points and external threats for the development of medical tourism. Thus, growth Strategies (SO) have been considered as a priority for the development of this part. Also, studies show that the lack of adequate and sufficient publicity and problems in the exportation of visa and also the lack of planning and cooperation and coordination in between the parts related to the absorption of medical tourism are problems that must be solved.

Keywords: Strategies Planning (SWOT), Medical Tourism, Ahwaz

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1. Introduction

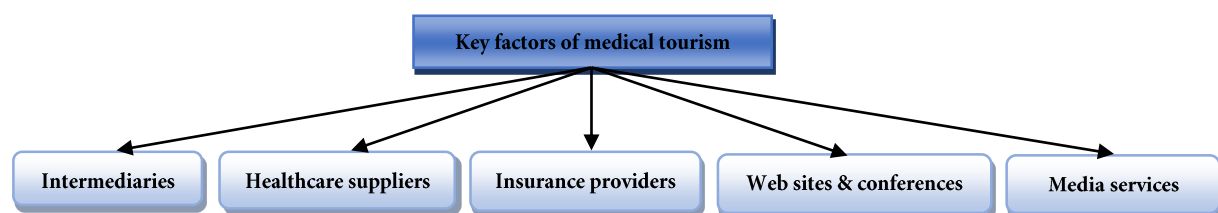
In the recent decades, the possibility of medical tourism development has been provided due to globalization. As the health services have gone beyond the borders of developing countries, finally the developing countries which have specialists and medical experts have also been allowed to enter the challenging industry of medical tourism [1]. There are many factors that caused to increase the demand in medical tourism, the factors such as increasing the cost of healthcare in the industrial countries, differences in quality and access to healthcare, lower costs of transport, trade liberalization and many others factors [2]. Therefore, the most important reasons for the rapid growth of medical tourism are such as insufficient and at the same time the low quality of healthcare in mother countries, lack of health insurance coverage in mother countries and longer waiting time for access to medical care in mother countries [3]. The vast range of available treatments that medical tourists are seeking nowadays are plastic surgery (Breast, Face, liposuction), dentistry (Beauty, Healing), cardiac surgery (Bypass, Heart valve Replacement), orthopedic surgery (Arthroplasty, knee Arthroplasty, Transplant surgery), bariatric surgery (Gastric Bypass, Gastric Bonding), reproductive system (IVF, Sex Determination), cell transplantation, organs and tissue (Organ Transplant, Stem Cells), eye surgery, diagnostics technology and checks up. Generally, none of these treatments are among the critical issues and are not life threatening and some of them are clearly less important in the general trend of healthcare. It

has been estimated that in the coming future, the countries of the Persian Gulf will spend more than 60 billion dollars for medical treatments abroad their own countries [4]. In terms of our competitors in the Persian Gulf in regards to medical tourism are Jordan, Dubai and Saudi Arabian countries. Jordan is welcoming to its medical tourists for the reason of having the appropriate costs about medical tourism in comparison to American and European countries. This country is yearly earning 500 million dollars from foreigners coming for different treatments. Dubai with having uncounted investors from different parts of the world, is increasingly growing in terms of medical tourism. The first hospital that was built in Dubai was an Iranian hospital and yet this hospital is accounted as the best and most equipped medical center in this city. The growth rate of medical tourism in Dubai had been an annual amount of 15 percent that indicates the amount of demand and supply of facilities. In Saudi Arabia, also cosmetic surgery and dental services are common to Hajj pilgrims [5]. Therefore in the years from 2006 to 2007 countries such as Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia are gaining above 3 billion dollars from the treatment of 2 million medical tourists [6]. At the moment, the medical tourism industry is providing an annual revenue of about 60 billion dollars in world trade [7]. The key factors of this growth is not only the increase of population but also the increase of chronic maladies of Arab people in this part of the world. In less developed countries, medical tourism is an ex-

clusive right for elites and capitalists. Countries with undeveloped healthcare and common infrastructures spend a lot of money for abroad treatments. For example, Nigeria has expended about 20 billion dollars for these needs in each year [4]. Among the potential advantages of medical tourism that has been proposed by the sponsors of the medical tourism industry the following advantages can be mentioned: 1) Using medical tourism as one economic and advanced strategy in the destination countries, it will caused an increase of income and will develop the GDP in these countries. 2) Advocates believe that medical tourism will keep specialists in their own countries instead of them migrating to foreign countries. 3) Also this industry could cause to create jobs (inside and outside medical fields), improve infrastructures, technology and training to attract more of tourists to these countries [8].

These factors have caused the medical tourism industry to become a growing trend in Asia. In Iran the low but continuous movements are formed in order to attract health tourism and especially medical tourism. In the 80's, medical tourism was formally considered in terms of entrepreneurship in the health sector. Afterwards, in 2004 the Health Tourism Policy Council was formed in the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization but it had no impact on the tourism industry [9]. Iran has admitted about 12 thousand foreign patients in 2004 which this rate reached about 17 thousand and 500 patients in 2005, but after 2005, there is no accurate information and evidence about the number of medical tourists in Iran [10]. Treatment of diseases such as infertility, plastic surgery, cosmetic, dental implants and periodontal surgery are the most important of travel reasons of these people to different cities of Iran. High quality and cheap prices of medical services in Iran compared to the Arab countries, central Asia and even Europe has caused patients to choice Iran as a destination for their treatment. Most medical tourists who have chosen Iran for their treatment are mainly from the Persian Gulf countries and central Asia [11]. With distinctive definition of medical tourism, the statistics that have been reported include all foreign patients who receive medical services in the host country. In other words, the statistics include those outsiders in the foreign countries, although they are not considered medical tourist. Different sources have significant differences about the relative importance of the received health services during the trip to the

host country [12]. Medical tourism is defined as a process which patients travel to outside their country to receive medical care which are usually unavailable or non-payable in their own countries due to certain medical procedures [13]. Yap believes that medical tourism includes patients traveling to abroad (life place) to receive medical treatment which may be minor injuries or some of special treatments or periodically testing of physical conditions. Atlas also states that medical tourism includes passengers who leave their permanent residence to other countries for more than a day to treat their disease, to improve their health (such as yoga, massage therapy), cosmetic (plastic surgery) and fertility. Medical tourism is composed of three basic dimensions: Hospital/Healthcare, Hotels and Travel/Leisure. Therefore, with attractive policies and getting the appropriate strategies, this emerging industry can provide significant opportunities for economic growth and infrastructures development for the participating countries. In order to achieve this goal, the host countries need to consider frameworks which are attractive enough to consumers all around the world. This frameworks should include strategies to tempt consumers/clients to come to the host countries to gain their health again [1]. In this case, orthopedic surgery, heart surgery and plastic surgery are done among the medical processes in the target hospital of medical tourism that attract the international patients [15]. Thailand is the first country that has entered the medical tourism industry and remains as a leader in the Asian-Pacific area. In 2003 Thailand attracted about 400000 medical tourists and quickly became one of the centers for cosmetic surgeries. However, in 2010, India, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia became destinations with medical specialties and travel destinations to enjoy medical holidays. In a study with the title of exploring and exploiting medical tourism opportunities in Greece by Faidon and Vasiliki in 2012, the services of medical tourism in Greece and also the influential factors in medical tourism services were studied [16]. Liu and Chen in the 2013 in the research with title of cultural issues in medical tourism are surveying this subject and they are results that cultural potential must be unlauted in the health system, medical organizations and individuals. These results show that the countries which provide the medical services must be examined the relevance ways between physician-patient and the culture of physician-visitor [17].



Source: [19]

Zarghami and Shalbfafian in the 2011, in the research with title of applying the SWOT model in the analysis of medical

tourism (case study: Iran), have been examined the key factors of medical tourism development and by using of SWOT

model and PEST pattern and competitive model of Gorter, have been analyzed the internal and external factors of medical tourism development [18]. At present, the medical tourism is the world developing industry with the range of key financial benefits including intermediaries, healthcare suppliers, insurance providers, suppliers of web sites and conferences and media services. These financial benefits are summarized in the following figure 1. This section is provided a number of support services and accessories to medical tourists [19].

The most important poles of medical tourism in Asia are countries such as India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Philippine and Iran is also having the potentials that can find excellent position in medical tourism of the world.

1.2. Purpose of Research

The purpose of this step is to analyze the internal and external factors of medical tourism in Ahwaz city. The internal factors include the weakness and strength points of its internal environmental of the case study. The external factors for the medical tourism development of Ahwaz city include opportunities such as being borders with Iraq, Kuwait and the Gulf Persian countries, low costs in compared to these countries, skilled teams and many more factors. The threatening factors include the economic sanctions of Iran, lack of price stability and inflations, increasing the exchange rate and its instability, lack of stability in rules and regulations and many other factors.

2. Methods

This research is a descriptive-analytical study. The strategic model of SWOT was used to find the internal and external factors such as the weakness and strength points, opportunities and threats facing the development of medical tourism in the case study city. Finally an optimal strategic plan model to develop the medical tourism in Ahwaz was presented. The SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunities and threats) model is a model that is designed to determine long term and short term strategies and makes major and key decisions about different subjects and issues. This model can be designed for one organization or company or for a specific geographical area or subject.

In the first step this model determines the potentials and capacities of a theme or a place and the internal and external factors affecting it are examined. In the second step, with use of these results the strategies are determined to make decisions and predictions and guidelines for making improvements.

2.1. First Step

Internal Factors: These factors are the factors that are within their own system or area and are effective in the determination of the area status. In the SWOT model, internal factors include the strength and weakness points of a system or company or an area. Identifying the strength points has revealed the ways of the system reinforcement and along with it has identified the weakness points.

External Factors: These are the factors that are out of control and affect the outside of the system. These factors are somehow related to the processes that occurred outside the studied area. External factors include opportunities and threats. This means what factors from outside can be seen as an opportunity and can be affective for the development of an area and on the other hand, what factors may be considered as a threat which is a risk for the area and should be avoided in order to change to be considered as an opportunity.

2.2. Second Step

This step is to identify the four patterns of the SWOT model for the compatibility of the internal and external factors.

Strength and Opportunities (SO): The first area is the best position. In this case, the system faces several environmental opportunities and it has a lot of strengths that encourages the use of opportunities. This condition is recommended as a growth strategy.

Strength and Threat (ST): In the second area, the system has key strengths but faces threats in the environment. In this condition, the strategies are used by the existing strengths to build the long term opportunities in the other cases.

Weakness and Opportunities (WO): In the third area, the system is faced with great opportunities but suffers from several internal weaknesses.

Weakness and Threat (WT): In the fourth area, the system is faced neither with the opportunities nor with the strengths of the internal environmental but is faced with the internal dimension of the weaknesses and the external dimensions to many threats. In this case, the best strategy will be a reduction strategy [20].

2.3. Case Study Area

Ahwaz city is the center of the Khuzestan province and one of the metro police cities of Iran. This city is located in the central sector of the Ahwaz eparchy. This city is located in the geographical position of 31 degree and 20 minutes of the northern latitude and 48 degree and 40 minutes of the eastern longitude in the plain of Khuzestan and is 18 meters above the sea level and at the distance of 874 km from Tehran. As Ahwaz is one of the metro police cities of Iran with several specialty and supper specialty hospitals such as Aria, Apadana, Emam Khomeini, Mehr and so on, and as being successful in different medical fields such as orthopedic, cardiac surgery, ophthalmology, neurology and also due to modern medical facilities, nearness and less costs in compared to other countries that are neighboring this city and due to the strategic position of the Khuzestan province and also because of its historical, religious and natural attractions can be successes in the field of Tourism and especially in medical tourism.

2.4. Data Analysis

After identifying the sets of internal and external factors by using the Delphi method and the experts opinions related to

the topic of study in the sectors of medical tourism (the number 6), the accomplished factors and criteria were weighted.

Table 1. SWOT Matrix and how to determine the strategies

SWOT Matrix		Strength (S)	Weaknesses (W)
		Subject Strengths are listed	Subject Weaknesses are listed
Opportunities (O)			
Subject	Opportunities are listed	SO Strategies	WO Strategies
Threats (T)			
Subject	Threats are listed	ST Strategies	WT Strategies

Source: [21]

3. Results

3.1. Internal Factors Affecting the Medical Tourism of Ahwaz City

The aim of this step is to evaluate the internal environment of the case study to identify the strength and weakness points. These are the factors that is considered to achieve and access the planning goals and execution of its plans are fa-

vorable bases and dissuasive. In this section, the internal affective factors (strengths and weaknesses) are identified and ranking and have been specified their importance coefficient (Table 2). As shown in Table 2, in this case study the numbers of 16 internal strength points against the numbers of 12 internal weakness points have been studied. The total sum of the internal factors for the medical tourism development of Ahwaz city is 2.44.

3.2. External Factors Affecting the Medical Tourism of Ahwaz City

The aim of this step is to evaluate the external environment of the case study to identify the opportunities and threats related to the medical tourism development which they face. In this section, the external affective factors (opportunities and threats) are identified and ranked and the importance coefficients are specified (Table 3). As shown in Table 3, in this case study the numbers of 10 external opportunities against the numbers of 10 external threats have been identified. The total sum of the external factors for medical tourism development of Ahwaz city is 2.8.

Table 2. Internal Factors (strength and weakness points)

Internal Factors (strength and weakness points)	Weight	Rank	Weight Score
S ₁ : existence of efficient and skilled forces	0.05	3.1	0.155
S ₂ : having special sections including a VIP part for foreign patients	0.04	3	0.12
S ₃ : experienced masters in different medical fields and related sections	0.05	2.3	0.115
S ₄ : expanding supplemental insurance and contracting with them	0.03	2.9	0.087
S ₅ : updating the medical equipment	0.05	2.4	0.12
S ₆ : frequency of first degree and desired hospitals	0.03	2.1	0.063
S ₇ : existence of specialists and ultra-specialists in different fields	0.04	2	0.08
S ₈ : providing proper services to patients	0.05	2.7	0.135
S ₉ : having religious commons with the neighboring countries	0.03	2.5	0.075
S ₁₀ : performing major surgeries such as cancer & spinal cord	0.03	2.8	0.084
S ₁₁ : having great equipped hospitals	0.03	2.4	0.072
S ₁₂ : being borders with Iraq, Kuwait and the Persian Gulf countries	0.03	2.1	0.063
S ₁₃ : lower costs of treatment, accommodation and transportation compared to the neighboring countries	0.05	1.6	0.08
S ₁₄ : having an international airport	0.03	1	0.03
S ₁₅ : the use of all health services in various fields especially surgery	0.03	2.1	0.063
S ₁₆ : existence of research centers in the hospitals	0.03	1.4	0.042
W ₁ : lack of hospital space in compared to the province population	0.02	3.2	0.064
W ₂ : Majority of health team members being students	0.02	3	0.06
W ₃ : lack of advertisement and awareness of the facilities and available specialties in the hospitals	0.03	2.7	0.081
W ₄ : lack of adequate information of the hospitals in the web sites	0.04	3.2	0.128
W ₅ : lack of cooperation and coordination in between hospitals and travel agencies	0.05	2.5	0.125
W ₆ : shortage of skilled nursing teams	0.05	2.8	0.14
W ₇ : low medical standards in the hospitals	0.03	2.1	0.063
W ₈ : very hot weather in this city in the first months of the year	0.02	3.3	0.066
W ₉ : existence of heavy dusts in the recent years	0.03	3	0.09
W ₁₀ : lack of staff fluent in foreign languages	0.04	2.2	0.088
W ₁₁ : lack of medical tourism companies and agencies	0.04	2.3	0.092
W ₁₂ : not having a specified and targeted plan to attract medical tourism	0.03	2	0.06
sum	1		2.44

Table 3. External Factors (Opportunities and Threats)

External Factors (Opportunities and Threats)	Weight	Rank	Weight Score
O ₁ : being borders with Iraq, Kuwait and the Persian Gulf countries	0.07	3.5	0.245
O ₂ : lower costs	0.06	3	0.18
O ₃ : existence of specialist and supper specialist and skilled teams	0.07	3.1	0.217
O ₄ : increasing the quality of hospital services in future planning	0.05	3	0.15
O ₅ : formulating a 5 year plan to attract medical tourism	0.04	2.6	0.104
O ₆ : possibility of using new advertising methods to attract medical tourism	0.06	3.1	0.186
O ₇ : use of new opportunities in clinical government systems	0.05	2 ^Y	0.1
O ₈ : validation and deployment of Hemozhilansy	0.03	2.2	0.066
O ₉ : expansion of the hospitals (space and facilities) for providing better services and emphasizing medical tourism	0.05	3.1	0.155
O ₁₀ : favorable weather in the cold months	0.03	3.1	0.093
T ₁ : economic sanctions of Iran	0.06	3.3	0.198
T ₂ : lack of price stability and inflations	0.05	2.6	0.13
T ₃ : increasing the exchange rate and its instability	0.05	3.2	0.16
T ₄ : not having of medicines and medical supplies	0.06	3	0.18
T ₅ : lack of stability in rules and regulations	0.03	2.5	0.075
T ₆ : not having security due to war in the neighborhood of this city	0.06	2.1	0.126
T ₇ : poor management and supervision of the entry and exit of medical tourists to this city	0.05	2.9	0.145
T ₈ : lack of specialty in travel agencies to attract medical tourists	0.04	2.1	0.084
T ₉ : existence of dealers and non-specialized intermediaries	0.05	2.2	0.11
T ₁₀ : not having the part of advertising and marketing in the city hospitals	0.04	2.4	0.096
sum	1		2.8

Table 4. Strategic Plan

SWOT Analysis	Development Strategies (SO)	Improve Strategies (WO)
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increasing and improving the quality of health services of Ahwaz city compared with neighboring provinces and countries 2. The use of new opportunities in clinical government systems and the expansion of supplementary insurance and contracts 3. Formulating a 5 years plan to attract medical tourism and using ways and new advertising methods for developing this industry 4. The professionalization of the nursing team and training foreign languages to them 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The expansion of hospital space and specialty sections for responding to the province needs and the acceptance of internal and external medical tourism 2. The promotion of medical standards in the hospitals and cooperating with the agencies and companies in charge of medical tourism 3. The use of information technology in the development of medical tourism and support researchers in this section 4. The reinforcement of available opportunities in the hospital of Ahwaz city and eliminating the weaknesses
	Diversity Strategies(ST)	Defense Strategies(WT)
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning to eliminate the effects of negative advertisement in international levels and using the potentials of this city for developing medical tourism 2. Reviewing the rules and guidelines related to the issuance of visa to attract foreign tourists and trying the best to stable the prices and exchange rates 3. Offering proper strategies for increasing the positive views of foreign tourists in regards to the security of Iran 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establishing special facilities and equipment in companies and agencies related to the medical tourism industry 2. To set up and update the web sites of medical tourism and to use new advertising methods for giving information about the hospital of Ahwaz city 3. The neutralization of the negative advertisement from the international society against Iran and making efforts to reduce and deal with the sanctions in Iran

3.3. Second Step: To identify the four patterns of the SWOT model by using the internal and external factors

In this step, after analyzing the internal and external factors, results have been used to formulate strategic planning. Strategic planning (SWOT) is provided to formulate the possibilities of the four different choices (Table 4).

4. Discussion

At present, the travel and tourism industry has become one of the fastest growing economic sectors worldwide. Despite the occurrence of external shocks such as political mutations, uncertainty of economics, in general, the world tourism shows an almost uninterrupted growth in the arrival of tourists in the past three decades. The arrival of the international tourists in 2012 for the first time went further more than 1 billion tourists and the receipts of international tourists was

more than 1000 billion dollars, despite the limitations of the global economy [22]. Therefore, the tourism industry is the largest and fastest growing economic sector in the world. It is expected that this growth trend with international arrivals will continue in the world and the average growth of each year is predicted to be 3.3 percent from 2010 to 2030. Medical tourism is a branch of health tourism that represents a rapid growth in the industry that leads to create the space which patients travel to receive the medical services beyond the national borders. These services can be selective treatments, emergency and specialized treatments, great and small surgeries and dental cares [23]. One of main factors in creating the evaluation and variation in the medical tourism industry of Iran is the comprehensive studies in the fields of the positive and negative consequences and logically looking to de-

velop them. In some sciences such as stem cells and the repair of spinal cord injuries Iran is at the top of the world and also in issues such as infertility and kidney transplant is able to compete with the most advanced countries in the world. This can provide a condition to develop the medical tourism industry in Iran and also attract tourists. These factors can all show the unique capabilities of Iran in this industry [24]. In the meantime, Ahwaz is one of the most important and strategic cities in Iran. This old and famous city has many tourist attractions and because of its strategic position which is located in the center of the boundary province has a lot of potentials to attract tourists, especially medical tourists. According to the present study, Ahwaz could be an effective and active city in regards to the medical tourism industry. The results of the research indicates 16 strength points against 12 weakness points that results in earning the final score of 2.44 from the internal factors. Also, the number of 10 opportunities against 10 threats are recognized in related to medical tourism development of Ahwaz city. This has eventually led into earning a total final score of 2.8 from the external factors for the medical tourism development of Ahwaz city.

5. Conclusion

Ahwaz city with having the strategic position in the country, having the main ports like the Emam Khomeini port, favorable weather in the cold months, having historical, religious and natural attractions and also having the medical potentials in the main hospitals can be one of the most attractive cities of medical tourism in Iran. By applying the strategic planning method results indicated that the city of this case study has relatively higher opportunities and strengths in compared to the weakness points and external threats for the development of medical tourism. Thus, growth Strategies (SO) have been considered as a priority for the development of this part. Also, studies show that the lack of adequate and sufficient publicity and problems in the exportation of visa and also the lack of planning and cooperation and coordination in between the parts related to the absorption of medical tourism are problems that must be solved.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors were involved in the study design, data analysis and result interpretation. All authors confirmed the final draft before submission.

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