

Health Tourism in Iran; Identifying Obstacles for Development of This Industry

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Abstract

Medical tourism plays an important role in national revenue of many countries; This industry earns about 100 billion dollars for the governments each year. However, Tourism is not developed in Iran and it is in its initial paces. As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Health recognized tourism-therapy in 2003. In addition, by doing this, rather than supporting tourism-therapy, the ministry mainly tried to create new jobs for the graduates of medical sciences. However, tourism-therapy was introduced as an independent industry in 2004 by the merger The Cultural Heritage Organization to The Iran and World Tourism. According to the planning, the Iranian government has devised plans to cover 30% of medical and health needs of the country, by the end of 4th national development program, through exporting medical products and services. Therefore, determining the obstacles in the way of optimum development of tourism-therapy industry is of great help to the country.

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the most dynamic and fast growing industries in the world. It is recognized by the UN as one of the main tools of economic development, employment and higher income [1-3]. In the developed countries, tourism adds to diversity of incomes and reduction of incoherence in the economy, while in the developing countries, the industry is a chance to increase exports at a faster pace comparing to the traditional ways. Moreover, fewer negative consequences, more profit margin, direct/indirect job opportunities, public benefits, and proper economic models are some other advantages of the industry. Lowiss Turner argued that tourism is the most promising

and complicated type of industry for the third world and the best candidate for replacing other profitable industries [4].

According to the estimates by World Tourism Org. (WTO), about 25 million world tourist population in 1950 reached to 700 million in 2000, and the figure is expected to hit 1.6 billion in 2020. These figures convey a growth rate of 7% in a 50 year period (1950-2000). In addition, income of the industry in 1980 was about 105 billion dollars and 476 billion dollars in 2000; This figure for 2020 is estimated 1trillion and 590 million dollar [5].

Medical tourism, as a fast growing industry, is a branch of health-tourism that gives the patients



chance to travel abroad seeking medical care. Such services include optional treatments, essential and special treatment, major/minor surgeries, and even routine checkups [6,7].

The definition by WTO implies that one of the purposes that motivates tourists to visit other places is to seek health. What health is defined by the tourists is a type of tourism that is aimed to improve health condition (mental/physical) and only takes 24hrs or less in a year [8].

Among the different definitions by the WTO, we encounter other cases that are defined under the health tourism.

Wellness tourism: The term is used for the touristic trips to health villages that in many cases have hot spring and mineral water. The tourist tries to stay away from the daily life stresses and pays a visit to these places without direct medical attention and to rest. In most of the case, the tourist does not suffer from any specific disease and they mainly aim to enjoy the healing nature of the region [9-11].

Curative tourism: the term refers to trips which are aimed to enjoy natural treatment resources (mineral waters, salt, mud, etc.). Such trips are usually for medical purposes or spending recuperation under medical supervision or intervention. Regarding mud-therapy, Iran is one of the most favorite destinations in the region [3-5].

Medical tourism: The term refers to touristic trips to seek medical attention which is featured with specific surgeries in specific facilities designed for the tourists. In such cases, the patient may still need to spend a while in medical touristic spots (e.g. hot springs) [3-5].

South East Asian countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore are amongst leading countries in wellness tourism. Thailand has gained a good reputation in sex alteration surgeries and aesthetic surgeries [12,13]. India is one of the world's medical tourism destinations and along the variety of services provided, the country has made great efforts to improve its infrastructures, medical technologies, cost-benefit rates, and endorse international medical protocols. As a result of these measures, rate of successful complicated cardiac surgeries, bone marrow and kidney transplantation in this country is comparable with the world's top rated hospitals [14,15].

India, Malaysia, and Thailand have attracted more than 4.1 medical tourists in 2003, which brought them 1 billion Dollars. In 2005, the number of the tourists reached 5.2 million. Currently, the population covered by this industry reaches 40-60 billion, and it is experiencing an annual growth rate of 20%.

It is estimated that about 750000 Americans have travelled overseas in 2007 for receiving medical care. This figure is estimated to hit 6 million individuals in 2013 [16]. In general, about 40% of annual income of health services sectors is from the source of medical tourism [17].

Jordan is one of the most successful instances in wellness tourism in the region. The country has managed to offer medical services to 120 wellness tourist and gain an income of 620 million dollars [18].

Porter et al. emphasized the necessity of a special health insurance system for medical tourists in the tourism development program in Philippine [19]. A research conducted in Thailand recommended some measures to improve tourism industry: 1- to employ skillful and well-trained physicians; 2- to invest in medical equipment and improve quality of medical services facilities; 3- to separate the general and medical wards; 4- to establish a consultation relation between the physician and the patient through fast response services to the patients. Other facilities such as translator, recreational facilities, and hotel reservation services were also recommended [20].

The main challenges of health tourism in Iran

As mentioned earlier, in spite of cultural richness and variety and several national and ecotourism attractions, Iran has failed to gain a comparable share in the world tourism industry. Although, several advantages of tourism have made development of tourism inevitable, the problems and obstacles in the way of tourism development still hinder the development. Some of these problems are listed below.

a. Economic

Oil-dependent economy and no need for tourism income, reluctance of private sector to invest in tourism industry and low income margin are some of the factors that negatively influence Iran's tourism development [21]. Private section of medical

industry has simply low activity in this section [22].

A study in India emphasized that annual growth of medical tourism market in India (about 2.2 billion US dollars in 2012) and the state's commitments motivate the private sector to make more investment in tourism so that American Private Finance Fund and Indian investors have made more than 40 million dollars in health services in India [23].

b. Social

Lack of public knowledge as for tourism and national tourism attractions, enough welfare, health, and medical facilities, legal problems (customs regulations, visa issuance) are among the social challenges ahead of tourism industry [24].

Development of transportation infrastructures and ease of traveling foster travels to seek medical care at international standard and prices of the third world. In this regard, an ineffective airline service in Iran is a great challenge ahead of Iran's tourism industry [25,26].

c. Administrative and organizational

Realization of tourism development depends on the factors such as proper organizational structure, programming, trained workforce, and tourism and foreign investment regulations. Permanent development of tourism industry demands a capable and integrated management and correlation between public and private sectors. There are several roles played by the government including coordinating the policies, programming, reporting statistics, commissioning research works, determining tourism standards and regulations, supporting investments, offering marketing services, training skillful workforce, and developing infrastructures [27]. Tourism programming was first started in Iran in 1962 (initiation of the 3rd national development program), however, after more than 40 years, Iran's tourism is not in acceptable position [28].

Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Training is in charge of preparing for playing effective role in international markets and introducing Iran as the center of health and wellness services in the region, and to this end to provide the required facilities for introducing the capacities and marketing the medical services, products, drugs, and equipment based on the strategic and commercial policies. The target is to cover 30%

of foreign currency needs of the health and treatment sectors at the end of the 4th development program from the source of the incomes of medical exports [29].

Lack of well-trained workforce in tourism industry, lack of knowledge among the staff of tourism institutes (hotel servants, tourism agency staff) are along with some of administrative and organizational problems of Iran's wellness tourism [30].

As suggested by the world trade organization (WTO), value of service business in 2001 reached 1.4 trillion dollars (25% of world trade), and this share is expected to reach 50% of int'l trade by 2020. Service sector comprises 46% of Iran's GNP, still the sector suffers lack of supportive programs and health tourism constitutes a small portion of the market [31].

A study in Thailand (2006) revealed that Thailand government is planning strategies based on infrastructural development in health, hospitals, medical technologies and equipment, and expert human force toward development of medical tourism industry [32]. Mehrabi studied the challenges ahead of development of Iran's tourism industry and found a significant relation between administrative problems and development of the industry [33].

To improve health experts' knowledge regarding new procedures, access to higher education, financial resources in the developing countries are the chances given to them to use the opportunity of the new market and improve their health system [34].

Lack of infrastructural institutes for provision and improvement of quality and standard of the services was highlighted by Heng Leng as one of the challenges of medical tourism development [35] Gonzales named improvement of legal frameworks to protect the consumer's right and to enjoy high quality health care as the key factors of medical tourism industry [36].

d. Research and education

In view of the fact that the industry is a newly emerged market in many developing countries, most of them suffer lack of expert work force and even training facilities are not fully developed yet [37]. Lack of permanent education for training technical, executive, and training staff, and lack

of effective and efficient research system to recognize the strategic needs of the industry are of the main research and educational obstacles [38]. An international study also emphasized poor English language skills among the work force of Iran's hospitals [39].

e. Welfare facilities and services

1. Lack of welfare and accommodation services in the tourism industry.
2. Lack of supervision and controls on improvement, repair and maintenance.

Poor transportation system, lack of standard hotels and other services were mentioned in another study as infrastructural problems of Iran's tourism industry [40]. Furthermore, lack of treatment VISA makes it impossible for these tourists to use medical insurances [22].

f. Cultural and advertisement

1. Attitudes, negative mental image and wrong perception regarding tourists;
2. Irrational and different methods in dealing with tourists;
3. Structural drawbacks in advertisement and public information; and
4. Failure to used proper methods in dealing with tourists; [41,42]

Cultural differences and lack of knowledge of the hosts regarding the tourists' needs on one hand and lack of knowledge among the tourists regarding culture of the host society, which causing several problems is one of the major challenges that the tourism industry is dealing with. In many cases, people develop negative attitudes regarding tourism when they face with irregular behaviors of the tourism or encounter with cultural differences. There are also cases that local community considers being in tourism business as a low level work so that many of them refuse working in such businesses [43].

Results of a study showed that one of the main problems of medical tourism industry that results in lack of interest among domestic and foreign medical tourists to use the int'l medical capacities is lack of professional and effective information

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and poor electronic public information services of hospitals in particular [44].

Tourists need to be attracted through different marketing method. Moreover, countries must spend 3 to 5 percent of their budget for tourism marketing [45,46].

Erfan Nia concluded in a study titled "a comparative study on medical tourism information systems in different countries and solutions for Iran" that employing integral information system has the capacity to manage medical tourism process and other aspects of service provision. Such system can be used to introduce outstanding physician in the hospitals as an attraction for medical tourism [47].

Martin et al. showed in a study that advertisement and public information services play a key role in development of tourism and the key to success in tourism is to develop the well-designed system for marketing and advertising [48].

Jabari and Jahani (2008) showed that marketing for attracting foreign patients in Iran is not efficient [49,50].

Conclusion

Medical tourism must be dealt with is a systematic way. Specialized committees must undertake tourism attraction and advertisement measures. Moreover, the trend of patients leaving the country for medical care must be stopped through investment in research and education fields and development of modern and traditional health services centers.

Programming to overcome each one of the mentioned problems is recommended for further development of tourism industry. Although the factors introduced in this work are mutually related and working on none of them in isolation may solve the problems of the tourism industry in Iran, they can be dealt with through a step-by-step program toward realization of the objectives of 1400 outlook plan.

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