

## The Factors in Development of Health Tourism in Iran

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Health tourism refers to any type of travelling seeking improvement of health condition. It can be treated like a national strategy toward increase of national income. The present study is an attempt to survey the factors in development of health tourism in Iran.

**Methods:** The study is an analytical research and data used in the study were gleaned through library resources and academic site web. In addition consultation with experts was also added. Using snowball sampling 61 of the authorities of health tourism answered the questionnaire. Finally the results were analyzed using Friedman test.

**Results:** The findings showed that 3 main factors in development of health tourism of Iran are health tourism branding, correlation between different sections, and centralized services.

**Conclusion:** To have all its potentials of nurse health care realized, and to meet the goals of Iran 1404 outlook program, a comprehensive and executive planning must be adopted and other requirement to emerge as a leading country in the region regarding the industry must be provided.

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### Introduction

Health tourism means a planned travel to other place for preserving and regaining physical or mental health[1]. There are different types of health tourism including medical tourism, recovery tourism and preventive tourism[2].

Traveling for treatment and recovery are the two main reasons of medical tourism and in many cases coincident with spending leisure time depending on medical situation[3, 4]. Given the fact that financial pressure and problems of the modern life are the main reasons of the high stress people feel, health tourism is one the choices for those who long more health and welfare and to achieve it leave their stressful daily life now and then[5]. Development health tourism can be a part of national strategy to make an optimum use of national capacities for higher earning and gain high national security[6]. National security of the countries nowadays is divided into two parts; soft and hard security. Medical transaction and dependency of people and nations to receive reliable

and guaranteed medical services from another country bring stability and security for that country.

Health tourism market has been recognized as one of the profitable and competitive industries around the world; it is a new field of tourism. At macro level states are interested to enjoy the economic benefits of the industry. This has triggered an intense competition among the Asian developing countries to attract more tourists[7]. On the other hand, health tourism is more flourishing in the developing countries; which is rooted in globalization trend and economic open doors policy in the field of health services[8]. Health tourism, if dealt with as the first priority, can prevent the migration of money and work force from Iran.

Recent years have been featured with increase in number of travelers to abroad seeking medical attention[9]. This increase in number of medical tourists has to do with factors such as high cost of health services in the industrial world, easier international traveling facilities, exchange rate in



the global economy, fast medical technology advances, improvement of health care services in many countries, access to the Internet, and emergence of companies that act as intermediate between patients and hospital services in the world[10, 11]. With enforcement of international standards and laws in different parts of the world, people now look for the best quality treatment with more competitive charges[12, 13].

The results of researches have shown that increase in medical costs in the US and long waiting lists in the UK and Canada have lured many of patients in the North American and European countries to seek medical attention in the developing southeast Asian countries[14, 15]. There is no accurate information about the number of these travelers. The main problem in determining the exact number of these patients is about the accurate definition of tourist. In fact, the reported number includes foreign residents in the target country, business travelers, and other tourists who may need medical attention during their stay. Also the statistics includes those who use health services such as yoga, massage, and so on. It is clear, however, that a great number of patients are part of medical tourism process[16]. As estimated by McKinsey, the income from health tourism in the world market hit 100 billion dollars by the end of 2012[7].

A study in India emphasized that growth of health tourism in India reached 2.2 billion dollars in 2012 and commitment of the government has triggered private sectors' investment. So that, there is a private fund in the US that has invested 40 million dollars in health care services in India in cooperation with Indian investors[17]. Taking into account high return/investment rate in the industry, many countries have initiated plans to develop this type of tourism[18]. In the 1400 outlook, Iran has planned to become one of the main targets of health tourism in the world. The objective of the plan is to prevent national resources from draining out and to create a earning source for the county[19]. A study in Thailand showed that the Thai government is planning and codifying strategies to develop national medical infrastructures, hospitals, technology, medical equipment, and human forces along with running campaign for attracting health tourists[20].

Taking into consideration the advantages of Iran in health tourism such as low cost, high quality of services, experienced physicians, plenty of natural attractions, the country is planning to use this potential[21]. The Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education had enacted a law which stipulates conditions and requirements of medical centers that accept health tourists in 6 paragraphs under the titles of general condition, human force, medical equipment, geographical condition, extra conditions and the codes of medical centers' web-sites[22].

The ministry is also committed to provide the facilities for playing an effective role in the world market and turn the country into a center of medical services in the region. As a part of the strategic and commercial documents of the county, the ministry is required to provide the facilities for introducing capacities, marketing, and medical training, production of medical equipment and products and medicines. The goal of the policies is to cover 30% of foreign exchange requirement of health and treatment sector from the source exporting such services by the end of fourth development program[23]. As the 17<sup>th</sup> largest country and with population of 70 millions, Iran is home to one of the most ancient civilizations. Regarding natural attractions, weather, and historical sites, the country is ranked in 10<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> place in the world ranking[24]

According to WTO, value of health service business in 2001 was 1.4trillion dollars (25% of world business) and this rate is predicted to reach 50% of the world business volume. Although services sectors constitutes 46% of GDP, there is still a need for programming toward increase of the share of health tourism in the service market[24]. Concerning the health services provider centers, the clinics affiliated with the ministry of health make the main contribution. That is the ministry as the representative of the public sector is the main providers of health services in the country. Less than a half of the private hospitals with modern technologies are in Tehran followed by Shiraz, Mashhad, and Tabriz and these cities are the main destinations of medical travels. However, in 2008, the ministry, via the circulation of the codes and requirements of providers health services to tourists, asked and required the medical centers to provide the required conditions[23].

Proper policy making in compliance with the policies of tourism organizations toward attracting foreign patients through vast advertisement and investment in different sections of research and education, development of clinics, checkup clinics and equipping medical centers in vicinity of hot springs with modern and traditional equipment and investment in public relation fields can prevent many Iranian to leave the country to seek medical attention and surely prevent migration of money. As the surveys showed about 1 billion dollars leave the country by those who travel abroad for medical attention[19].

According to Iran 20 years outlook "Iran must be the first country in the region in health tourism" and to this end the country must become the provider of medical and health services in the regions so that 20 million tourists must enter the country in 1404 (2025) and the earning of the country from this sector must be 15 billion dollars[22]. In fact, the purpose of these measures is to win a share in the world tourism market and emerge as the medical services center in the region[18].

According to cultural heritage statistics, 20000 health tourists from the Middle East countries travelled to Iran in 2007 and constituted 12% of medical tourism of the country. However, there is still no clear statistics about the patients treated or under treatment in the country as there is no authority to record these data in the country[25].

All the medical centers and hospitals that meet the requirements can apply for the license from the Ministry of health for receiving foreign patients. The ministry is in charge of confirming realization of the standards regarding the staff, experts, geographical location, public relation, and marketing. All the medical centers can extent their license via the Internet and report their data to the ministry. Along with health tourism programs, the ministry also follows the program of issuing medical visa in cooperation with Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By accepting the program by the ministry of foreign affairs, the patients can apply for medical visa[26].

Along with the ministry of health, cultural heritage, tourism and handcrafts organization also follows programs under the title of "The Comprehensive Tourism Program." As noted, by the Article 87 of the 4<sup>th</sup> development plan of the county,

realization of health tourism goals has been assigned to the ministry of health, while the critics believe that what makes the neighbor countries more successful in the field was their integrated management system. Emirate is one Iran's neighbor and in spite of higher costs, along with Malaysia, India, Singapore, Dubai, Jordan, Turkey, Azerbaijan and some of Central Asia and Caucasus and White Russia are some of competitors of Iran in health tourism[24].

Iranian spend 1billion dollars each year in other countries and according to Market and Service Monitor of Iran Commerce Development Organization, following 1400 outlook, Iran can emerge as one of the main targets of medical tourism in the region. This will stop migration of money from the country and also be a source of earning for the country as well as more employment opportunities[19].

## Methods

The present study was conducted as a descriptive-applied work to prioritize the factors in development of health tourism in Iran. The study was performed in 3 stages. First, library studies using the reliable sources and determining the factors. Then, summarizing the findings of the previous part and interviewing the experts in the field and adding the fundamental concepts in the field. At the last stage, the factors were put into a questionnaire design and the questions were scored from 0 (no effect on health tourism industry) to 10 (highest effect on health tourism industry). Reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed by the experts and university professors and for validity Kappa test was used and the result was 80%.

Among the managers and authorities of medical tourism (The Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education, cultural heritage, tourism and handcrafts organization, Chamber of Commerce, private institutions in medical tourism business, and hospitals) 80 individuals were selected using snow-ball methods. The questionnaire was distributed among 61 individuals and returned back in two stages. Data analysis was conducted in SPSS (Ver. 16) using descriptive statistics test. Based on the results, the factors with highest score were considered in the development of health tourism.

**Table 1.** Main effective factors in health tourism

Number	Main Factors
1	Health tourism branding
2	Intersectional coordination (between the Ministry of Health, Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chamber of Commerce, private institutions transmission, airports, hotels, hospitals, etc)
3	Cross health tourism services (having a unique package of services)
4	Having an international medical visa
5	Having international standards
6	Appropriate medical expenses, accommodation and...
7	Access to distribution channels and online sales
8	Marketing and advertising strategies
9	Infrastructure and improve treatment
10	Facilities for health tourism

## Results

The results from the Chi square test on the data from the questionnaire showed that all the questions were pertinent to health tourism ( $P < 0.005$ ). Based on each of the factors, the most important factors in the development of health tourism were prioritized. In Table 1, the 10 most important factors in the development of health tourism has been prioritized.

## Discussion

With ideal weather and four seasons nature, historical, religious, natural, and cultural tourism attractions, modern medical centers equipped with expert human resources with international standards, suitable cultural condition for Muslims, great number of Iranian who live outside the country and need medical attention, high demand for life-saving medical services in the region, Iran has great potential to be a center of medical tourism in the region. The main advantages of Iran, considering strategic and competitive issues, is the competitive prices of medical services comparing with world and region standards. Concerning, the supporting and affiliate sections, the only advantage of Iran is its several medical faculties that can supply the required work force.

Given the potential of the country, Iran has many advantages to emerge as a leading country in medical tourism. However, it needs development in strategic and competitive fields, while the supporting and affiliated industries must be expanded. In a study by Ghalami it is stated that there are 6 effective groups in health tourism in Iran. The tasks of these six groups were named as policy making and planning, advertisement and public information, providing social, mental, and financial security for the tourists, implementing

training courses, supplying welfare facilities, and standardization[27].

Recognition of moral codes is essential for increasing the health tourist satisfaction. In this regard, many factors of medical ethics, which are observed in the country, can be also implemented in medical tourism. However, the globalization trend, variety of policies and interests, traditions and cultures, and customs are some of the issues that must be dealt with in a standard way before gaining the trust of the tourists. With immense religious, ideological, philosophical, moral background, Iran can bring in new standards in humanitarian services and medical tourism[28]. With these potentials, the country can emerge as the main destination of medical tourism for the Islamic countries.

Dubai has introduced a plan to establish "Dubai medical care city" in 2010. The clinic is located in Persian Gulf region and will be the largest international medical center between Europe and Southeast Asia. In addition, it is planned to start its business as a subsidiary to Harvard Medical Faculty, and probably become the most known medical center beyond the borders of USA[29]. This means that the city will become the destination of medical tourists and this warns the policy makers in Iran to take required actions if they want to meet the objectives of the 20 years outlook.

In his research titled "the approaches to attract medical tourists" Kazemi argued that inter-sector cooperation and participation at macro and operation level, development of human resources, development of basic and medical infrastructures, gaining international credit for the medical services, and effective marketing are the factors in development of medical tourism in Iran[18].

Development of legal frameworks to ensure protection for the users of the services and provision of high quality medical care were named by Gonzales as key factors in development of health tourism industry[30]. Portor et al. argued that expansion of special insurance for medical tourists is essential for development of medical tourism in Philippine[31]. Sing highlighted the recent measure of the Malaysian ministry of health for establishing five committees for development of health tourism in the country[32]. Another study in Jordan found that correlation between public and private hospitals, codification of programs to follow up the patients after discharge from hospital, holding English courses, and expansion of medical infrastructures were some of the effective strategies for development medical tourism in Jordan[33]. In a research titled “comparative study of information system of medical tourisms among countries and finding a strategy for Iran” Erfannia concluded that using integrated information system the whole process of medical tourism and all aspects of servicing can be managed. Such system also can promote and market the capacities of Iranian physicians who have international reputation. This helps attraction of medical tourist to the country[34].

### Conclusion

Although Iran has immense capacity for medical tourism, the path is not free of challenges. Factors such as poor cooperation and coordination between the bodies in charge of tourism, lack of specialized work-team in the ministry of health and cultural heritage, tourism and handicrafts organization, lack of integrated comprehensive information gathering system, inefficiency of public relation system to market the capacities of the country, lack of required infrastructure and legal frameworks for development in this field all hamper development of Iran’s health tourism industry[35].

In addition, knowing the advantages and spots for further development, Iran can make more investment in its advantage points and introduce them as its unique capabilities in provision of the services. Regarding the spots for further development, preparation of comprehensive programs, and modification of some of the procedures can

help the country to reach to its goals in the industry. Hospitals, on the other hand, can use strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) model to deal with their weaknesses and improve their strength. The model has been used in health tourism industry of other countries.

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