

Medical Tourism: An Emerging Terrain with Covid-19

Elaine T. Jurkowski^{1*}, Anthony O. Agbeh²

¹School of Human Sciences, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA; ²School of Business and Hospitality Management, Newbury College, Newbury, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

The world is undergoing a major crisis due to COVID-19 and most industries are being severely affected, although Medical Tourism is one of the hardest hit. The trends of travelling abroad for medical conditions came to a slowdown and near screeching halt as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19. Thousands of travelers were forced to cancel trips or postpone due to the outbreak. Travel abroad has become uncertain and risky, while borders have been closed to major countries and travel to some regions has been banned. This has affected the health care providers, the tourism industry as well as individuals seeking medical attention. COVID-19 has greatly impacted elective surgeries around the world, creating intended and unintended consequences. This paper is an attempt by the authors to share the impact of this pandemic on medical tourism along with suggestions for recovery.

Keywords: Medical tourism; COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global Pandemic. This pandemic resulted in a drastic decline in tourism all over the world. Medical tourism was hit hardest due to travel bans and lockdowns all over the world. As of August 10, 2020, there have been over 20 million cases and over seven hundred thousand deaths worldwide according to (JHU Coronavirus map, August 10, 2020). People travel for medical tourism for a variety of reasons lower cost, minimal waiting time, privacy and confidentiality, personalized care but the pandemic has disrupted these.

Background

Medical Tourism is becoming a growing industry in the United States. In addition to the growing tradition of medical tourism on the domestic front, there is also a growing trend with North Americans traveling to the developing world for medical treatments [1]. The concept of travel for people traveling with family and friends to provide emotional and social support while their loved one is undergoing medical treatment is also known as a component of medical tourism [2].

The idea of medical tourism is attractive to consumers because medical procedures can be less costly abroad as compared to the US market [1]. For example, the costs of medical procedures are compared across various countries. Table 1 provides an overview of

costs of a variety of medical procedures and compares them across various countries.

Medical tourism differs from acquiring a disease as a result of tourism (ie: Ebola). Acquiring a disease through tourism is more akin to risks taken as a result of tourism or diseases that are known to the specific location of travel, whereas COVID-19 can easily be spread through travel from one location to another. Although medical tourism is different from acquiring a disease while in travel, the actual practice of medical tourism has greatly been impacted as a result of COVID-19.

The advent of COVID-19 has seriously impacted Medical tourism because of the risks involved in travel, the costs of preparing for medical tourism and risks involved for the vendors and business owners.

METHODOLOGY

Confidence has decreased due to containment of the spread of COVID-19. Assurance of quality and COVID-19 safety procedure how effective are measures taken to ensure safety of travelers at airport, hospitals and lodging facilities. Cost increase, due low demand in travel, so prices increased to make up for the lost business.

Countries that do a better job on safety will surely convince consumers to travel to their destinations. According to the health security index Global health security index (GHS index), 2019 the

Correspondence to: Elaine T. Jurkowski, School of Human Sciences, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA, Tel: +7588784761; E-mail: etjurkow@hotmail.com

Received: September 24, 2020, **Accepted:** November 06, 2020, **Published:** November 13, 2020

Citation: Jurkowski ET, Agbeh AO (2020) Medical Tourism: An Emerging Terrain with Covid-19. J Tourism Hospit 9:450.

Copyright: © 2020 Jurkowski ET, et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Table 1: A Comparison of medical tourism procedures by country.

Procedure	United States	India	Thailand	Poland	Mexico	UK
Heart bypass	\$113,000	\$10,000	\$13,000	\$7,140	\$3,250	\$13,021
Hip replacement	\$47,000	\$9,000	\$12,000	\$6,120	\$17,300	\$12,000
Breast implants	\$6,000	\$2,200	\$2,600	\$2,200	\$2,500	\$4,350
Knee replacement	\$48,000	\$8,500	\$10,000	\$6,375	\$14,650	\$10,162
Heart valve replacement	\$150,000	\$9,500	\$11,000	\$9,520	\$18,000	
Gastric bypass	\$35,000	\$11,000	\$15,000	\$11,069	\$8,000	
Spinal fusion	\$43,000	\$5,500	\$7,000		\$15,000	

global preparation for the pandemic was poor. The average score was 40 out of 100 among 190 countries. A guideline needs to be set for international visitors. Hospitals certified by accreditation bodies will be well prepared to handle the pandemic [3]. Over the past year hospitals began to play innkeepers, opening the door to elective surgery which is a life blood of their revenue. Hospitals began to develop hotels near their operating rooms where patients who often came from overseas for specialized treatment could recover comfortably. This expansion into the hospitality business also allowed healthcare providers to avoid high costs of being hosts themselves. The pandemic left these hotels relatively empty especially during the early stage of COVID-19 according to The Baltimore Sun report. Medical tourism has been divested because Doctors are more focus on emergencies, hospitals cancelled hip replacements and tummy tucks, while flights bans have grounded many foreign visitors.

The pandemic ravage medical tourism with rise in cost, now hospitals are shifting their plans an example is Legacy hotel and Residence in Miami with an attached 100,000 square ft. hospital with mixed retail and living space. The new hospital-hotel concept would discharge patients to rooms in the hotel. The pandemic has now brought about concerns from the residents about not wanting to share space with hospitals with patient who are dying. The developers are now installing a medical grade air filtration system throughout the entire development even though it was planned originally just the hospital, adding ultraviolet light disinfecting solutions at high traffic areas such as the lobbies. Hilton hotel in Miami-Dade County which is affiliated with Coral Gables-based Baptist health South Florida operated throughout the pandemic, with Hotel staff having access to personal protective equipment as they considered essential workers.

The pandemic has brought about burden on health services, Convention centers, stadiums, cruise ships, and hotels have had to make changes in space to accommodate health demands. These uncertainties provide opportunity for innovation and restructuring the system that will dictate how health services will be delivered. Among other changes include remote and more affordable healthcare methods, telehealth is at the epicenter of efficient health care delivery, keeping patients home freeing up much bed space at hospitals [4].

Malaysia for example had big plans for medical tourism in 2020, but the pandemic has hit the country hard. In 2019 each week brought thousands to Malaysian, and the government had a growing list of private hospitals. In January 2020, over 15,000 hospital beds were ready for the anticipated influx of international patients. The government predicted two million international visitors expected,

an increase of 33% from 2019 medical tourism as it promoted year of health care travel. Government lockdown and border closure was a big blow to medical tourism.

The United States remains the largest international market for medical tourism accounting for 36% spend, across the Asia Pacific region. It was predicted that the growth rate will be an increase of 15.5% between 2017 and 2023. According to Medical and Health Tourism Congress (MHTC), treatment is 90% cheaper than private healthcare in the US. Example a coronary artery bypass graft would cost \$10,000 in India but around \$92,000 in the US. The uncertainty of COVID-19 lockdown, border restriction and social distancing stalled international travel. The United Nations World Health Organization estimate a 60% to 70% decline in Travel by the end of 2020 and Asia and the Pacific have been the region hardest hit, losing over 33 million tourists. In May 2020 private hospitals in Penang had decline of 66% and 55% in April as foreign patients dropped to zero and domestic patients postponed all but essentials treatment [5].

China, although months away from mass production of a vaccine has been using the promise of a vaccine as a diplomatic carrot such as Latin America and Caribbean to receive loans to buy medicine. China is also using the distribution of vaccines as a political tool to gain alliances with other countries who participate in the medical tourism arena. Bangladesh to get over 1000 free doses from a Chinese company. The Philippines would not confront China over its Claims to the South China sea, whereas China was willing to give Philippines priority access to a vaccine.

The pandemic has caused a lot of disruption as the world is scared. People are scared of their health and that of their loved ones. This uncertainty has caused families to stay home, some homeschool their kids, virtual learning, provide childcare around the clock 24 hours per day. Social situations are avoided, such as weddings, proms, and coffee with friends. Colleges and Universities are now COVID hotspots, similar to how nursing homes were earlier in the pandemic. Dr. Fauci a member of The White House CORONA-19 Virus team expects a return to normal around the end of 2021 or later.

The medical tourism industry is at a critical point in its young lifespan. In the aftermath of the pandemic many people will rather stick to more conservative methods of acquiring health services, and the post-viral effects on recreation and tourism-based industries is completely unknown. Many people are unlikely to feel comfortable flying to other countries for medical tourism without major assurances of safety and sanitation that must emanate from every point on the patient journey. Now is the time for medical tourism cities and healthcare destinations to be proactive in setting

up relationships with stakeholders such as hotel, airport, recovery resorts that leverage excellent screening and sanitization processes. Destination can evaluate their current medical travel infrastructure and focus on services that can be added based on customer shifting demands.

Medical tourism's future will be determined by actions outside the Industry control. Government management of healthcare and death rates will provide reassurance to travelers when selecting a destination in the post pandemic era. Also, countries with proven COVID-19 related expertise, learning, and capacities should there be tidal rises for infection rates once travel is phased back, and more important should a more sustained second wave [6].

Purpose of paper

The purpose of this paper is several folds. This paper will share the impact of this pandemic on Medical tourism along with suggestions for:

- Individual patients
- Medical facilities
- Hospitality and recreational facilities.

This paper will also identify what issues and needs does COVID-19 pose on the Hospitality and Tourism training industry. Lastly, this paper will identify strategies to address medical tourism amidst COVID-19

What is medical tourism?

Medical Tourism is the travel by individuals or families to another country in order to obtain medical treatment from another country [1]. It can incorporate along with the medical treatment, recreational features, cultural and heritage related to the specific region. It co-opts the concept of access to tourism while receiving medical procedures.

Impacts of COVID-19: COVID-19 has had a variety of impacts on the medical tourism industry for a variety of sectors to include the individual, medical establishments and hospitals, tourism and recreation professionals and training personnel within the hospitality and tourism industry. This section of the paper examines these areas.

Impact of COVID-19 for the individual: There are a variety of impacts for individuals as a result of COVID-19 when we think about the impact of this pandemic. These include cancelled elective surgeries and treatments or postponed elective surgeries of treatments.

Individuals also are affected by the risks associated with flying. In some countries, there are also restrictions with postponed or cancelled flights, closed airports and short staffing due to people being off work or employees in quarantine.

Individuals are also impacted by the absence of loved ones able to travel to health care facilities. The decline in medical tourism also has had an impact on the industry because entire families are no longer travelling together due to concerns related to acquiring COVID-19. Health Care facilities are also restricting the number of significant others who are visiting facilities.

Uncertainty for the individual is another impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that affects the individual. Low consumer confidence plays a role in the travel equation. Cross-border medical tourism and the uncertainty if border crossings will be open or closed also poses some level of stress and uncertainty for individuals. The stress of "sheltering in place" has also created a desire to escape to remote locations aware from crowds. Time lost due to imposed quarantine is also a factor for individuals who may not have the time available to quarantine upon entry to their destination, and once again upon arriving back home.

Impact of COVID-19 for the medical establishments/hospitals: COVID-19 has had an impact as well on medical establishments and hospitals. These impacts include a host of arenas. Firstly, the need for additional PPE equipment for staff and medical personnel is a impact because personal protective equipment is needed for all medical professionals. This becomes more apparent and important with the issues of medical tourism because individuals would be in demand and request personal protective equipment to ensure safety. Workers also need to worry about their surroundings.

Medical establishments also have to take into consideration the need for elective surgeries and limit elective surgeries due to the risk of people potentially contracting COVID. In this process, the need to prioritize who will receive elective surgeries will take place, and there is a need to ensure that workers are prepared with protective gear for surgeries and procedures.

Guest and visitors are also limited during the time of COVID-19. Limited visitors to one guest only who can serve as a significant advocate for the individual. The use of zoom or facetime in order to communicate with loved ones imposed the need for additional staff resources. Although consumers or patients are limited to one visitor, this then limits the number of potential guests who would also accompany a loved one for travel as a result of medical tourism.

Loved ones, who are limited to the visiting time in the hospital, are also going to be limited to the options for tourism. Visitors of loved ones seeking treatments may be interested in onsite entertainment and cultural events. Although the demand may be high for spas, thermal springs, yoga and bird watching or ecotourism, medical establishments should consider strategies to invest in technology that enabled virtual (video) communication.

Planning for medical needs of people seeking treatments as a result of medical tourism, may include the need for ICU treatments and the fact that the average stay may also be increased due to risk. Increased risk for fatality is also known or seen for patients impacted due to COVID-19. Attention is needed to safeguard the health of other patients and staff who may be impacted by patients seeking treatment and who may have contracted COVID-19 while travelling to their medical tourism destination. Financial Revenue has also declined sharply due to cancelled surgeries associated with medical tourism.

Impact of COVID-19 for tourism and recreation facilities: COVID-19 has a number of impacts for tourism and recreation facilities. Of course the first and for most is business decline. Due to the pandemic, people are less likely to use facilities. In terms of the actual running of the facilities, more time and energy needs to be taken for testing at check in of each guest, to assure that there are

not conditions related to the virus, such as fever and temperature.

Tourism and recreational facilities also have to intensify their cleaning and disinfectant regime within their facilities. In addition, they would have to provide protective equipment and masks to their employees which results in extra costs to the facilities. These additional costs often fall upon the shoulders of the company, since the number of guests who may be able to visit the facility are greatly reduced due to social distancing in lobbies, and throughout the facilities resulting from social distancing [7].

Often within cultural facilities, no housekeeping services are available during the Guest's stay. Cleaning can take place however during the down time between guest stays, by facility staff.

Strategies for individuals, medical/hospital facilities/tourism & recreation facilities and training personnel

A host of strategies are available to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the medical tourism industry. The following section of this paper identifies and details these areas to include strategies for the individual traveler, strategies for medical/hospital facilities, strategies for tourism and recreational facilities and strategies for training personnel.

Strategies for individuals traveling for medical tourism during COVID-19

Suggestions for travelling for medical tourism: Individual travelers can take advantage of a host of different strategies to help avert travel issues when traveling for medical tourism purposes despite the current COVID-19 pandemic. These include ensuring that one checks with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC-North America) and the World Health Organization for updates and advice on travel advisory statements. Some advice for example may include the advice for people living with high risk conditions to avoid long plane travel, which could reduce outbound medical tourism options. Travelers with means however, may consider a private jet to transport them to their destination and to ensure that they have minimal contact with infected travelers. In addition to checking these resources, travelers will want to check with the local and statewide health advisories to where they are coming from and where they are going to be aware of the most up to date travel advisory information.

When traveling, it is advised to create a direct travel plan to get to one's destination with as little contact, delay and interaction as possible. Travelers should avoid traveling through infected cities, and airports, especially those known as cluster zones. In addition, travelers should have back up plans in the event that they are forced to stay longer in the country that they are visiting, or in the event of unexpected quarantine.

Strategies for medical/ hospital facilities: Medical/hospital facilities also have specific set of strategies which they should consider when addressing the concept of travelers who are traveling for medical tourism purposes. These organizations/entities should consider the complexity and outcomes of the condition for the consumer looking for medical tourism related treatment. Facilities will need to ensure that isolation/quarantine facilities are available for loved ones/support or companions upon arrival.

Strategies within the facilities to ensure safety include the intensive/

deep cleaning and disinfection of facilities and equipment. It also includes the availability of personal protective equipment for staff and guests.

Lastly, in this area, collaborations between uncommon partners are strongly recommended. An uncommon partner for medical facilities includes recreation/tourism and hospitality partnerships. These partnerships are vital during this pandemic time frame because it ensures that activities are available to loved ones or companions traveling with the individual seeking treatments and offers a dimension of tourism/culture for companions and loved ones.

Strategies for tourism and recreation facilities: A number of strategies exist for tourism and recreational facilities to address the needs of people traveling for medical tourism. These include the development and availability of video presentations about specific cultural facilities within the area and region. In the cases where such resources are closed due to safety needs and the pandemic, the videos or multimedia resources will provide the opportunity for one to be able to feel like they have participated in cultural tourism and recreation. Such a venue will require collaboration between the tourism industry, Chamber of Commerce and local hotels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implications for training personnel

A number of implications surface for training personnel working within medical facilities, and the hospitality/tourism industry. Modules and Fact Sheets related to COVID-19 can be integrated into one's training process, Continuing Education curricula and webinars for hospitality and tourism professionals. Academic partners should work toward building continuing education/lifelong learning opportunities through short courses and professional develop sequence certificates.

Hospitality safe environment recommendations: A number of recommendations have been identified and suggested for the hospitality industry to provide safe environments for travelers. These include the following:

- Provide a safe environment by isolating the guest or employee who test positive for COVID 19. No ill employees should come to work; code of conduct should be signed by employees.
- Eliminate hand shaking with employees.
- Hire professional cleaners to clean and sanitize the establishment.
- Develop a preventative place, and contact information if guest have critical questions on COVID 19.
- Reinforce hand washing for employees- install hand sanitizers in front office lobby, restaurant, spa and fitness center front doors.
- Review cleaning of handrails, public restrooms, and front desk area.

Hospitality marketing recommendations: A number of recommendations have also been identified for hospitality marketing. These include the following:

- Reassess Digital Marketing Strategy by staying connected with past and future guests through social media, email (to maintain brand relationship).
- Ensure a flexible cancellation policy. Share image of property to use as background for Zoom meetings. Have kid friendly coloring pages.
- Engage guest past and future on social media by offering affordable rates, offer complimentary rooms, giving back to health care workers, donate food to local hospitals, and donate to COVID 19 recovery funds.
- Broadcast new measures through websites, newsletter, and social media.

Hospitality operations recommendations: A number of recommendations for hospitality operations have been identified and include the following:

- Investigate work that can be completed at home, example sales work from home. Front office social distancing of 6 feet.
- Have staff empathy for guests who might not want to sit close to others- be prepared for spaced sitting (be flexible).
- Furniture in the lobby for social distancing. Discuss traffic flow in front desk and restaurant to eliminate mass grouping.
- Review your payment delay policies. Create contingency plan in case of a shut down, work with employees, guests, investors, leaders to determine mitigation and finally review your insurance policy.

A Recommendation for Institution of Learning (Hospitality Programs) include the ability to offer online courses to train operator on Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)

CONCLUSION

The new normal for medical tourism will be very different from

what it used to be prior to COVID-19. It may take at least 1-2 years to develop a vaccine; therefore other options may be necessary. Travelers may consider new options in order to avoid some of the risks associated with travel domestically and internationally. Travelers seeking options for medical tourism may invest in private jets, rather than travel via traditional air carriers.

Medical tourism in the future may focus on the domestic market and stronger collaborations with stakeholders as compared to focus on the international market. COVID-19 need not prove fatal for medical tourism; however, the domestic medical tourism may expand and flourish as a result of the impact, especially for travelers with modest means.

REFERENCES

1. Lunt N, Smith R, Exworthy M, Green ST, Harstall R, Mannion R. Medical tourism: Treatments, markets and health system implications: A scoping review. OECD Report. 2013.
2. Casey V, Crooks VA, Snyder J, Turner L. You're dealing with an emotionally charged individual...": An industry perspective on the challenges posed by medical tourists' informal caregiver-companions. *Globalization Health*. 2013;9:31.
3. Gosling S, Scott D, Hall M. Pandemic, tourism and global change: A rapid assessment of covid-19. *J Sustain Tour*. 2020;1-20.
4. Anjorin A. The coronavirus disease (2019): A review and update on cases in Africa. *Asian Pac J Trop Med*. 2020;13(5):199-203.
5. Young L. Now Pandemic, corona virus will hit medical tourism hard. *Int Med Trav J*. 2020.
6. Kumar S. Impact of corona virus (COVID-19) on India economy. *Agriculture and Food:e-Newsletter*. 2020;2(4):301-302.
7. Sharma S. Impact of covid-19 outbreak over medical tourism. *J Dent Med Sci*. 2020;19(5):56-58.