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Dental Tourism-A Boon to Indian Practitioners

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Short Communication

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The 21st century is witnessing a boom in the oral disease load due to remarkable changes in individual's dietary habits. On the other hand, the awareness towards dental health is also increasing at equal pace with an increase in the number of people or aspirants wishing to seek appropriate solutions to their dental problems. But, finding appropriate solutions to their dental problems is challenging from financial perspective and uncompromised working hours due to busy working schedule as people wish to get rid of their oral problems with minimal expenditures and limited time. How can it be possible? Dental tourism could be one of the most suitable solutions. Dental tourism also called dental vacations is a part of medical tourism. It involves individuals seeking their dental care outside their local oral health care systems which is accompanied by a vacation. The total cost of dental care, meals, accommodations, transportation and side trips to tourist attractions is less than the price of local care ^[1]. This innovative concept is gaining momentum in the recent times. It is reported that dental tourism constitutes 10% of Indian medical tourism which might grow to an extent of 30% by 2015. As the world becomes ever more interdependent and competitive, technique, material and technological advances spread rapidly, enabling providers in developing countries to provide quality dental care at significant cost savings when compared with their peers in the developed world. Americans are traveling to Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, and South Korea for various dental services. The main reason for the dental vacation could be price variations in dental treatments, thus travelling from high-income countries to low-cost developing economies.

Process flow

1. Travellers either contacts tour operators or surgeon directly. The queries are answered and the schedule is fixed.
2. Tour operators arrange all the documents and facilitate the trip.
3. Traveller visits the tourist country and undergoes the treatment.
4. Post treatment, tour operators organize the trip and provide all the facilities.
5. Traveller may need to visit the dentist again as per treatment required.
6. Traveller leaves the country and remains in contact with the dentist (**Figure 1**).

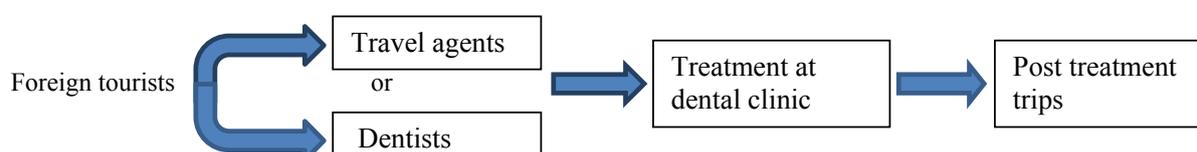


Figure 1. Flow chart of dental tourism.

Scope of dental tourism in India

India is becoming the favored destination for dental tourism because of its advanced infrastructure and technology which is in par with the developed countries like USA. India has some of the best treatment centers in the world with world class facilities. India is also emerging as one of the most favored tourist destinations in the world. India is capitalizing on its low cost and well-trained dentists to appeal to the tourists. Even with airfare, the cost of travelling to India in search of dental treatment can be economical, and the quality of services is often better than that found in the western world. In fact, many patients are rather pleased at the prospect of seeking dental care in India while holidaying. The key hubs for dental tourism in India include cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Jaipur, Chandigarh, Kerala and Goa. These clinics offer trained dental experts, latest dental technology and world class facilities.

Why India can be dental tourism destination?

Travellers choose to go to foreign country for any kind of dental treatment not purely on the basis of cost. Having surgery abroad is without any doubt a big decision and therefore the quality of care at reasonable cost should be the most important factor to consider. The advantages of opting for dental treatment in India include:

1. Access to quality dental care at reasonable cost: India with its large pool of highly qualified, skilled dental professionals is a hub for multitude of dental services. The quality dental services can be available at 1/10th of the cost of services in western world. For example, cost of root canal treatment in India will range anywhere between 100\$ to 200\$ whereas in US it is as high as \$3000. A dental filling costs between \$20 to \$40 in India whereas in US it costs between \$300 and \$400. A dental implant in the US costs around \$4,000 and \$3,500 in the UK. Prices can go as low as \$750 in India [2]. This leads to significant savings on dental care.

2. Comfort level: It can be due to English speaking doctors and paramedics and there by Indian paramedics are getting an international exposure.

3. Less waiting time: It is possible due to availability of more number of qualified professionals. Travel agents or dentists themselves could fix prior appointments for tourists according to their tour resulting in less waiting time.

4. Improved sterilization techniques: The sterilization protocol followed in India is in par with the international standards and thus resulting in carrying out all dental treatments in a microbe free environment.

5. Lower Medication cost: The cost of medicines in India is less due to strong pharma sector which is gaining world recognition due to no import duty. There is strong recommendation for 'generic' drug production in order to bring down the costs. There is also low cost of drug development in India due to strong software support.

6. Low labour cost: The amount spent on procuring the paramedics and other secretarial staff is less due to readily available manpower.

7. Tourist interest: India's contemporary attraction for tourism and business. The tourists get attracted to its 500 years old civilization. The thirst towards country's traditional art and craft as well as its cultural and religious diversity could be one of the dragging forces for the tourists.

8. Alternative medical proposition: India is a hub for its ancient stream of medicines. The alternative methods of medicine (medical approaches) such as Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Yoga and Acupuncture are gaining public acceptance in modern India.

Expected outcome of dental tourism in India

1. Quality dental services resulting in bringing special identity to the nation in the global markets or world.
2. Overall growth in commerce and insurance industries which adds up to the country's economy.
3. Employment in tourism industry and health care sector
4. Catalyses or Promotes India to the club of global leaders.

How to promote dental tourism in India?

Quality dental care rendered at affordable cost is pivotal in promoting dental tourism in our country as it exposes the efficiency of our dental experts to the international community. Hence, extreme caution should be anticipated in satisfying the foreign tourists. There should be an absolute co-ordination between Indian Dental Association (IDA), its local bodies and tourism promoting organizations in the country. The central ministry for the foreign affairs should monitor and guide the dentistry regulating bodies which in turn should co-ordinate with the various state tourism corporations or renowned private tour companies that should tie-up with only those local dental care providers who gives a written assurance on delivery of quality care. A provision should be made in the law to prosecute or to initiate stringent action against those providers who does not follow the quality norms or protocol or standards established by the regulating bodies.

Expected myths about dental tourism

The most common myth among certain segment of dentists is that inexpensive cross-border dental care may be substandard.

Suspected threats of dental tourism

1. The most important threat is that dental procedures carried out in foreign countries is not guaranteed.
2. Patients who undergo dental procedures in foreign countries might have to pay more in their native countries to get rid of any complications that arise later.
3. Differences in the legal systems in foreign countries will acts as a hindrance in sueing dentists by the patients for compensation due to gross negligence ^[3].
4. The agencies which regulate the sterilization and infection control standards may vary from country to country and thus may have an impact on the patient's state of oral health.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, dental tourism is emerging as a new tool for marketing dental health and cultural beauty in real sense so as to promote dentistry as well as our tourism. The concept of getting treated while getting treat holds good for dental tourism. With an expected increase in the costs of oral healthcare, the scope for dental tourism will widen in the near future. Finally, dental tourists will find a true heaven in India if it is promoted and supported by the government.

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