

## Impact of COVID-19 outbreak over Medical Tourism

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**Abstract:** With the world undergoing a major crisis due to COVID-19 and most industries being severely hit, Medical tourism will also face major impact that will adversely affect all associated with it, be the healthcare providers or the individuals seeking medicare. As we are writing this paper India is facing 8<sup>th</sup> week of its Lockdown including restriction of International aviation services as well as limited healthcare services causing shut down of Medical tourism in India as well as all catering nations. This article is genuine attempt by the authors to understand and elucidate the impact of this pandemic on Indian Medical Tourism industry along with suggestions for recovery.

**Key Word:** Pandemic, COVID-19, Medical Tourism, Healthcare.

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### I. Introduction

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a recently diagnosed infectious illness linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold. It was first reported in Wuhan Province of China in October-November 2019<sup>1</sup>. COVID-19 has caused a global outbreak after Chinese new year around mid of January. It was only by February when western countries began the process of lock down after a significant number of cases were diagnosed. The World Health Organisation on 30th January 2020 announced a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and on 11th March 2020 COVID-19 was declared as a Pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Most countries have already undertaken extreme measures to restrict movements and impose lockdowns to control further transmission and minimise spread of infection, but by the time the mere existence and gravity of this was taken into account it had already crossed borders and territories. India reached a significant number of COVID-19 cases by mid of March almost all due to International Travel following which flights to and from India was majorly restricted.

It is well understood that this Pandemic has affected the human population in almost every possible way. Health, Economy, Industry, Food every sector is jeopardized because of restrictions, the impact is so deep that along with a threat to health, it has become an equal threat to global economy. Medical tourism being an amalgamation of Health care and international travel is a medium scale industry to some nations having considerable contribution in their economy. The effect of a Pandemic on this industry will be multidimensional. It will definitely interfere with patients going to other countries on medical visa, consequently having a direct impact on health care revenue generation to a significant level.

### II. Elucidation

COVID-19 outbreak is truly a global crisis as no country is spared by its terror. Countries which rely on tourism, travel, hospitality, and entertainment for their growth and economic well being are experiencing particularly large disruptions. Developing economies and emerging markets are facing additional challenges with unprecedented reversals in capital flows as global risk appetite wanes, currency pressures while coping with weaker health systems, and more limited fiscal space to provide support. Moreover, several economies entered this crisis in a vulnerable state with sluggish growth and high debt levels. For the first time since the Great Depression both advanced economies and emerging markets and developing economies are in recession. For this year, growth in advanced economies is projected at -6.1 percent. Emerging market and developing economies with normal growth levels well above advanced economies are also projected to have negative growth rates of -1.0 percent in 2020, and -2.2 percent if you exclude China. Income per capita is projected to shrink for over 170 countries. Both advanced economies and emerging market and developing economies are

expected to partially recover in 2021.<sup>3</sup> The pandemic has caused severe global socioeconomic disruption.<sup>4</sup>

A significant part of many developing or developed economies is dependent on Medical Value Travel which is one of the fastest growing industries, also commonly known as Medical Tourism. Many patients travel overseas from their homeland to get healthcare facilities which may or may not be available in their country. These individuals drive revenue for the travel and medical industry collectively as their sole purpose is to get positive results at competitive prices, which they couldn't earlier.<sup>5</sup> Medical tourism is a multibillion-dollar industry worldwide that is expected to grow considerably in the next decade.<sup>6</sup> For any individual who is interested in healthcare services, cost is one of the key factors involved in the decision to receive medical care abroad. With improved technology over the years and affordability of travel has given a rise to Medical Tourism in eastern nations, as most countries in the west including the US or UK have very high cost of medicare services. Individuals prefer to travel to various other parts of the world to get better health aid at lesser price, most famous destinations are India, Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand, Hong Kong etc.<sup>7</sup>

Main factors that drive medical tourism are the cost effectiveness of procedures, advanced technology and better quality of care provided by health institutions. The global medical tourism market size was valued at USD 44.8 billion in 2019 and is expected to witness a CAGR of 21.1% over the forecast period.<sup>8</sup> Medical tourism leads to generation of substantial revenue in developing economies, helping them further expand their healthcare business. This has resulted in increased involvement and promotion of medical tourism by government authorities. For instance, in Thailand, the government is targeting new potential markets such as China, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam to benefit from the growing affluence and increasing demand for professional healthcare services in these countries.<sup>7</sup> India's medical tourism industry could grow by 200% by 2020, hitting nine billion dollar, according to Ministry of Tourism figures. In 2015, India ranked as the third most popular destination for medical tourism, when the industry was worth three billion dollar. The number of foreign tourists coming into the country on medical visas sat at nearly 234,000 that year.<sup>9</sup> Now this virus has affected and spread to most parts of the world and is still continuing to grow in number with every passing minute. Typically the symptoms of COVID19 can be controlled by medication and early detection can help in speedy recovery. But there is no proven formula developed to attack and kill the virus yet. Even though health care services did not stop post declaration of lock down, major focus of Health care was to develop COVID recovery units. Even though all major hospitals were functional, all most all of them were doing only emergency procedures or indulged in treating COVID.

Another challenge faced by Hospitals in India were development of COVID cases among their doctors and supporting staff through direct contact of COVID patient or indirectly through asymptomatic patients who visited Hospital for other reasons. This is not just an alarming situation among those who are treating COVID patient but also a question on safety measures against the disease. These points are critical for the reputation of Hospital which caters international patients.<sup>10</sup>

India being a country with decently advanced and inexpensive health care services at the same time, is global hub for international medical tourism and like any other industry, it will also be affected by the Pandemic.

With an assumption of International travel to remain restricted for some more time Medical Tourism industry is going to face a direct hit. Hospitals are doing only emergency surgery procedures or only those elective procedure for life threatening health condition for which there are no other treatment options. It is believed that both doctors as well as patients will defer or delay elective surgical procedures for a long time to come considering involvement of risk of COVID infection. Certainly this pandemic is going to disturb the multi billion dollar medical tourism industry in India. The damage or loss to both economy and reputation in this field can be a transient or permanent one. Of all the bad that the world is facing in name of this pandemic, the only good thing is development of better health care facilities.

Definitely in current times there is no global transportation and thus absolutely no possibility of Patients travelling to other countries for their needful health care, but even after this, as the world will begin to function and pick its speed, things are not going to be the same. Few of the countries will develop their healthcare facilities so good that their patients may not have to go to better countries for surgeries. Depending upon how effected any particular country is, patients may not choose that nation as an option for Medical Tourism. Some countries may not give visas for particular countries depending on risk involved in International travel to that particular country. The world is also experiencing economic crisis, and many patients may have to give it a second thought if they can bear the cost of medical tourism at the moment. Value of currency is going low because of ceased business and global import export.

### **III. Discussion**

At the time of writing this article, there have been 114,000 confirmed cases, and 4,000 deaths relating to COVID-19. The four biggest countries affected by the virus are China, Italy, Iran and South Korea. The COVID-19 virus impact means that for many medical travel destinations, 2020 is likely to be a year to forget. Fighting epidemics, or stopping them from spreading, has a cost. When a country is ahead of the spread, the

cheap, non-disruptive tools (e.g. vaccines) work. When a country reacts too late or underestimates the problem, then quarantines, movement restrictions and strain on the health-system become more likely, as does the number of infections, with more people seriously ill or dead. People with heart and lung disease or weakened immune systems, as well as infants and older adults, are at higher risk. It is particularly fatal for elderly people and those with pre-existing conditions. Many medical tourists fall into the high-risk categories so are most at risk. Early indications were that the disease would peak and fall after a few months, affecting tourism and medical tourism.<sup>3,4</sup>

Finally, lessons from COVID-19 are an opportunity for accreditation companies. Healthcare quality assurance is now an even hotter topic and so far, many hospitals with certifications from high quality accreditation companies have been well prepared to handle the crisis. A line of protocols that was applied to hospitals (mainly private) has played a significant role in identifying this virus early, so protecting the rest of the hospital patients. With other hospitals, maybe COVID-19 will be the motivation for providers to improve and become safer for the patient.

Medical Tourism Industry is a rapidly growing health care stream world wide. Like any other International Industrial services it is dependant on global transport and travel status. Where as it was predicted that Global Medical Tourism industry's worth will be approximately 45 Billion US Dollars and India alone was a market of approx. Nine Billion US Dollars.<sup>11</sup>

Medical Tourism is considered as an important pillar in over all of growth of Health care industry amounting to the revenue it generates. The growth of Medical tourism in last decade has definitely influenced overall growth of health care sector. Due to multidimensional impact of Pandemic COVID-19 in form of Health care crisis, falling economy, Cessation of International Travel followed by restricted International travel with due risk of infection, Medical Tourism industries around the globe is going to suffer for a substantial time to come.

Like any other industry, this sector will also take some time to recover. Small steps towards rejuvenation are very important for this sector to stay alive. It will be important that Government should bring some standardisation into Health care system exclusively for Medical tourism for the Reliability among International Patients. Considering the fall in global economy a revised treatment charge planning is also advised

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Pandemic COVID-19 is a challenge to mankind in all possible aspects. It has bought the Nations, Economy and Industries into a stand still, even if for a while. Almost all nations are facing a concept called as Lockdown and cessation of International travel. Even though basic activities and industries may soon resume working, the impact is going to last for quite some time. Medical Tourism industry is going to face a definite lag in its estimated growth due to above mentioned impact of Pandemic. It is quintessential for all the Countries catering Medical Tourism, along with all internationally recognized Hospitals and health care services to plan and act towards minimum damage and maximum recovery from the same. It may need revision of Medical Visa criteria, revision of health care standard and treatment charges.

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