

THE RISE OF DENTAL TOURISM OF INDIA

Shafi Ahmad*, Prasanna Kumar YS**, Padma Bhat***, Manish Kumar*

*Postgraduate Student, Department of Public Health Dentistry, Rajarajeswari Dental College & Hospital, Bengaluru, Karnataka

**Reader, Department of Public Health Dentistry, Rajarajeswari Dental College & Hospital, Bengaluru, Karnataka

*** Professor & Head, Department of Public Health Dentistry, Rajarajeswari Dental College & Hospital, Bengaluru, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

People from many advanced countries, including the United States and Europe, see a benefit in traveling to developing third world countries, like India, Thailand, Philippines, South Africa, etc. while combining medical treatments with inexpensive vacation. This trend is now known as medical tourism. Dental tourism, a subset of medical tourism, involves individuals seeking dental care outside their local healthcare systems, coupled with a vacation. India, a country of continental proportions, has become a popular destination for foreign patients in recent times, particularly in dental care. Every year millions of people fly from all over the globe to India to get dental treatment done and have a splendid holiday at the same time. India's accessibility and availability of quality assured and cost effective dental treatment, amalgamated with its myriad hues of culture and heritage, has exponentially fostered the bloom of India in "dental tourism."

KEYWORDS: Dental tourism, Dental treatment, India, Medical tourism.

INTRODUCTION

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 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. Thus, Dental tourism has emerged as a suitable solution

involving individuals seeking their dental care outside their local oral health care systems which is accompanied by a vacation.¹ Dental tourism (also called dental vacations) is a subset of the sector known as medical tourism, which is a growing sector in India. American Dental Association thus define dental tourism as an "Act of traveling to another country for the purpose of obtaining dental treatment".² It is growing worldwide as the world becomes ever more interdependent and competitive, technique, material, and technological advances spread rapidly, enabling providers in "developing countries" to provide dental care at significant cost savings when compared with their peers in the developed world. India is fast emerging as one of the top dental tourism destinations in the world. Every year thousands of people from all parts of the globe including USA, Canada, UK, Europe etc travel to India for low cost but world class dental treatment. Apart from costs of dental treatment dental tourists find India a very attractive country to travel.³

INDIA: A HUB FOR DENTAL TOURISM

India, which is already known for being a yoga and meditation hub, is now catering to tourists' smiles.⁴ As hotspot for dental tourism, India offers dental treatments of the highest standards, with top technology and modern facilities. The country is home to many international dental clinics, most of which have served tourists from the US, the UK and other European countries for more than 20 years.⁵ India is fast becoming one of "the" most affordable destinations for dental care as the cost of dental care in the western countries are approximately 10 times more than that in India. Apart from costs of dental treatment tourists find India a very attractive country to

travel. India is rich in its culture and has some beautiful places to visit including beaches, mountains, hill stations, historical monuments, forts, temples, and churches. A World class dental treatment with 70% savings and a great holiday is all that make India an exotic place to visit. The most preferred dental treatments include Dental Implants, Crowns & Bridges, Dentures, Fillings, Full Mouth Restoration, Gum Treatment, Bone Grafts for Dental Implants, Lumineer Porcelain Veneer Procedure, Porcelain Veneer Procedure, Teeth Whitening, Veneers, Inlays & Onlays, Root Canal Treatments, Cosmetic Dentistry and Oral & Jaw Surgery.⁶

ADVANTAGES OF DENTAL TREATMENT IN INDIA

Inexpensive treatment cost: The Western and the European countries charge double to 6-7 times more compare to India. Dental treatment cost is generally not reimbursed by the National Health Schemes of some countries and is way too expensive for most to get a comprehensive treatment plan.⁷ The cost comparison of dental treatment between USA and India is shown below (Table 1)⁸.

High Dentist-Population Ratio: For a population of over 1.2 billion, there are currently over 1,80,000 dentists, which include 35,000 specialists practicing in different disciplines in the country. The dentist population ratio is found to be 1:9000 dentists in metros/urban and semi-urban areas and around 1:200,000 dentists in the rural area. The number of dentists is expected to grow to 300,000 by 2018 and the dental specialists to 50,000. Every year over 24,500 dental graduates are added to the list.⁹

Lack of dental insurance: In Western countries, dental insurance is a big thing but in India it is still in its infancy stage with only a few handful insurance companies covering dental procedures, where the national health scheme in many countries do not cover the dental treatment under this policy, average citizen and low income group cannot usually afford which accounts for cross country dental care.

Large Indian diaspora: NRI constitutes the chunk of Indian Diaspora spread across the globe. With the main intention of meeting their relative and also getting their teeth pampered the number of travellers comes to the country.

Communicating language: Most of the dentists are well versed with English, which makes it easier for communication purpose.⁷

Combining alternative health care with dental treatments: The health care industry in India has revolutionized itself and many tourists combine holistic therapy with dental treatments to make complete use of their vacation⁴.

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.

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.

Travel opportunity: 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 tourists¹.

Political environment: A stable government, suitable political environment and a flexible visa regime all contribute to the growth of tourists.

Transport connectivity: The factors such as better infrastructure, roadways, railways and airways and connectivity with the state have led to a boom, enhancing the inter-state and international transport.³

Access to latest technology: Expertise among the doctors in India is at par with the best in the world, including in the field of technology like designing implants on a 3-D image using CAD-CAM¹⁰.

Follow up: After the treatment patients are ensured of post operative care. This includes regular calls and tele-consultation.

DRAWBACKS OF DENTAL TREATMENT IN INDIA

1. If patients develop complications it is difficult to return to international clinics for further treatment. All local dentists will not be willing to treat problems and complications pertaining to dental care provided by dentists in another country.⁴

2. The liability issues may discourage some dentists from rectifying substandard procedures. Legal redress approval in instances of negligent care is an important risk related to cross-border

dental care. Some dental tourists are bound to find it costly, impractical or impossible to obtain legal and financial redress after suffering harm while receiving dental care in another country.¹¹

Dental Procedure	Cost in USA (\$)		Cost in India (\$)
	General Dentist	Top End Dentist	Top End Dentist
Smile designing	-	8,000	1,000
Metal Free Bridge	-	5,500	500
Dental Implants	-	3,500	800
Porcelain Metal Bridge	1,800	3,000	300
Porcelain Metal Crown	600	1,000	80
Tooth impactions	500	2,000	100
Root canal Treatment	600	1,000	100
Tooth whitening	350	800	110
Tooth colored composite fillings	200	500	25
Tooth cleaning	100	300	75

PLANNING A DENTAL TOURISM

Websites, newspaper/magazine or other special agencies are the one which provide foreign tourists with the information about the dental tourism. Then an individual chooses from a platter of dentists and later contacts his travel agent, who manages his visa/passport, travel plan within India, hotel accommodation, to and fro air travel and other logistic support. The shortlisted dentist gets the dental treatment done on the patient, and the travel agent manages the vacation/destination. Patients may also contact the dental clinic directly *via* internet or phone, in order to get a quote for his treatment. However, here the patient does not pay the commission to the agent for organizing the trip.⁷

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR INDIA

There are few issues and challenges that need to be addressed to overcome the roadblocks to facilitate the growth of dental tourism industry in India. They may include:

1. Upgradation of basic amenities, as they give poor image of our country to travelers and also raises doubt about quality of dental care facilities.
2. Co-ordination of healthcare and tourism sectors which can be done through facilitation by the government. The Indian healthcare federation, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), Government of India and respective state government has to coordinate to promote this industry.¹²
3. Standardization and accreditation of hospitals. Factors like lack of uniform pricing across all the hospitals in India and inequalities in private-public partnership are also challenges for dental tourism. Because of this, many other countries like Thailand providing good quality dental care are emerging as strong competitors of India. The Indian healthcare Federation (IHF) has brought in concept of 'price banding' to bring some consistency in the prices of different procedures.
4. Accreditation will be used to negotiate with overseas health insurance companies to extend their cover to include treatment in India.¹³

PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES 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.¹
- The Indian Dental tourism industry can develop a significant advantage through promotion and packaging alternate therapies such as Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Homeopathy, and Yoga.
- Advertising Internationally (websites, lists, tele & mail ID).
- Establishing Medical tourism companies/ Indian Dental Tourism Corporation.
- Health Insurance for treatment.¹²

THE FUTURE PROSPECTS IN INDIA

India has the required manpower to cater to the dental needs of countries. With the current government activities in full throttle, future is filled with exciting possibilities such as:

- Enhanced dental jobs opportunities.
- Enhanced professional practices and interpersonal skills.
- Dental tourism contributes to the National Gross Domestic Product (GDP).
- Fostering exciting International Alliances.

CONCLUSION

Dental treatment forms 10% of the total Indian medical tourism as one of the reasons for the increasing popularity of dental treatment in India is due to the fact that many dentists of Indian origin practice in the West. This builds confidence among the patients for undertaking medical tourism as they already know the professionalism, clinical expertise, as well as the advantages of traveling to India for a very reasonable cost. Thus the popularity of dental tourism in India will continue to grow and become a significant source of revenue generation.

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