



Medical Tourism: Prospects In Kerala

¹ Lt. Seena V., ² Dr., Lt. Reji G. D., ³ Soumya Viswambharan

¹Assistant Professor, ²Assistant Professor, ³Assistant Professor

¹Department of Economics, T.K.Madhava Memorial College Nangiarkulangara, Alappuzha,

²Department of Economics, Bishop Moore College, Mavelikkara, Alappuzha

³Department of Economics, Sree Narayana College, Punalur

Abstract: Medical tourism involves crossing international borders to avail medical treatment and facilities in another country and enjoy the tourism facilities there. Medical tourism is an important sector in stimulating the economic growth of Kerala. The growth of medical tourism in Kerala is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by the state's high-quality healthcare services, affordability, and integration of traditional and modern medicine. The sector significantly contributes to Kerala's economic growth through revenue generation, job creation, and infrastructure development. More than five lakh foreign patients come to the state for treatment every year. About 25% to 30% of major hospitals' revenue comes from medical tourism (Confederation of Indian Industry). Government initiatives play a crucial role in supporting and enhancing this growth by implementing supportive policies, promoting the state internationally, and investing in healthcare infrastructure. This study explores how Kerala is progressing in medical tourism, why people from other countries choose Kerala as their favorite medical tourism destination and the role of government in promoting medical tourism.

Keywords: Medical tourism, Market Development Assistance (MDA) Scheme, Indian Healthcare Federation (IHF), Medical Visa, Heal in India Initiative, Kerala Medical Value Travel Society

Introduction

Medical Tourism also known as medical travel, health tourism, or global healthcare, refers to the practice of traveling internationally to seek medical services while enjoying the recreational and leisure facilities available. Currently, medical tourism is gaining the highest acceptance in the international community. Today millions of people travel across international borders to seek medical care due to several factors. Medical tourism is increasingly becoming a viable option for individuals seeking cost-effective and high-quality medical care. The benefits of accessing advanced treatments, saving on costs, and receiving comprehensive medical service packages in high-class hospitals with highly qualified and well-trained doctors, with the most modern equipment and facilities are driving its growth. Additional advantage for medical tourist in Kerala is easy access to this land with mild climate, natural beauty, friendly and compassionate locals and easy access to the destination with four international airports. These factors not only enhance the attractiveness of the state as a medical tourism hub but also contribute significantly to the overall positive experience of international patients.

Objectives of the study

- 1, To explore how Kerala is progressing in medical tourism.
- 2, To understand the factors responsible for the growth of medical tourism in Kerala.
- 3, To investigate the role of the government in the growth of medical tourism in the state.

Methodology

The present paper is based on secondary data obtained from various literary sources, including various research papers, news articles and websites.

Progress of medical tourism in Kerala

Kerala's evolution from a wellness destination to a prominent medical tourism hub is a fascinating journey shaped by its rich tradition in Ayurveda and its advancements in modern medical care. For centuries, Kerala has been renowned as a global center for Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine. This reputation is built on a rich tradition of natural healing practices and holistic health treatments. Kerala's Ayurvedic treatments are deeply rooted in traditional scripts and are administered in their purest forms, preserving the authenticity of the practices. The existence of highly qualified, multi-lingual Ayurvedic doctors and skilled masseurs who provide treatments based on centuries-old traditions. More over Kerala's healthy tropical climate is ideal for Ayurvedic treatments, which often involve therapeutic and detoxifying processes that benefit from the state's warm and humid conditions. Through constant marketing and branding, Kerala has achieved a unique position on the global tourism map, especially in the wellness and Ayurvedic tourism sectors. Moreover, Kerala is synonymous with Ayurveda and wellness and has been labeled as the "Wellness Hub of the World". Therefore, a large number of medical tourists globally prefer Kerala for their treatments.

Kerala has this strong base to evolve from a wellness destination to a leading player in the global medical tourism sector. More and more hospitals are joining hands with the tourism industry to tap the potential of medical tourism. Globalization and economic liberalization have given a boost to the medical services sector, especially in Kerala. High priority given to health in Kerala will turn this relatively new aspect of tourism into a multi-crore industry in the future. Leveraging on an established wellness brand, high health indices, skilled professionals, advanced healthcare facilities and attractive tourist destinations, Kerala can effectively position itself on the global medical tourism map. Through strategic planning, investment and marketing, Kerala can become a top choice for medical tourists worldwide.

Key factors responsible for the growth of medical tourism in Kerala

The growth of medical tourism in Kerala over the past two decades can be attributed to a combination of factors that have made the state an attractive destination for patients seeking healthcare services. Here are some of the key determinants contributing to the surge in cross-border medical travel to Kerala:

1. Low cost of treatment

In Kerala, the cost of medical procedures is often very low compared to many western countries. This is especially attractive to patients who face exorbitant costs for surgeries, diagnostic procedures, or long-term treatments at home. For individuals without medical insurance or inadequate coverage, paying out-of-pocket for medical treatments can be very expensive. Kerala provides a cost-effective alternative that allows these patients to get the medical care they need without incurring exorbitant costs. And many insurance plans do not cover elective procedures like cosmetic surgery and dental treatments. Patients seeking such services can benefit from significantly lower costs in Kerala, which provide high-quality care

at lower rates compared to their home countries. Hospitals in Kerala often offer attractive package deals that include not only medical treatments but also ancillary services like accommodation and transportation. These packages can offer more savings and convenience to international patients.

2. High Quality Care

Despite the low cost, the quality of medical care in Kerala is at par with international standards. Advanced medical technology, skilled professionals and accredited hospitals ensure that patients receive effective and high-quality treatment. Healthcare facilities in Kerala are equipped with state-of-the-art medical technology. Hospitals invest in the latest diagnostic equipment, surgical equipment, and treatment technologies to ensure patients receive state-of-the-art care. This technological advancement supports accurate diagnosis, effective treatments, and improved overall patient outcomes. Kerala has a highly trained and experienced medical workforce. Many health workers in the state have received their education and training from reputed institutions within and outside India. This expertise results in high-quality care, with doctors, surgeons and specialists providing world-class medical services. Hospitals in Kerala often hold prestigious international accreditations from the Joint Commission International (JCI) or the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH). These accreditations are proof that these hospitals meet global standards of care, patient safety and operational excellence.

3. Prolonged Waiting and Delay for Treatments in Home Countries

In many countries, patients often face significant delays for medical procedures due to inadequate availability of patient care services. This extended waiting period can lead to prolonged suffering and increased complications. As a result, patients are increasingly turning to medical tourism as a viable alternative. Medical tourism not only provides quicker access to necessary treatments but also allows patients to receive care abroad, often coupled with the opportunity to enjoy a holiday in the treatment destination. This approach effectively reduces wait times and alleviates the associated difficulties of waiting for treatment at home.

4. Healthcare Institutions with International and National Certification

When selecting an overseas treatment destination, patients often prioritize medical institutions with recognized international or national accreditations. These certifications play a crucial role in building trust and confidence in a competitive medical tourism market. Accreditation ensures that hospitals meet high standards of healthcare quality and safety, aligning their services with international patient expectations. Accredited hospitals are better positioned to demonstrate their commitment to excellence and are continuously motivated to update and enhance their practices. Common accreditations in medical tourism destinations include:

- Joint Commission International (JCI)
- Australian Council on Healthcare Standards International (ACHSI)
- National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers (NABH)

These certifications not only signify adherence to rigorous standards but also help patients make better decisions about their healthcare options abroad.

5. Affordable air travel and its impact on medical tourism in Kerala

Availability of affordable air travel options to Kerala plays a crucial role in making it an attractive destination for international medical tourists. Competitive airfares from major global cities to airports in Kerala (such as Kochi International Airport and Thiruvananthapuram International Airport) reduce the

overall cost of medical travel, making the destination more accessible. Also, better connectivity through various international airlines increases Kerala's accessibility. Regular flights from major cities in Europe, Middle East and Southeast Asia ensure that patients can reach Kerala conveniently and efficiently. An increasing number of direct flights and connecting routes support the influx of international patients. The major medical tourism markets in Kerala include, US, UK, Mali, Gulf- Bahrain, Oman, UAE and Sharjah.

These airlines often offer promotional fares, discounts and special packages for medical tourists, further reducing travel costs. These promotions can make a significant difference in the overall cost of a medical trip, encouraging more patients to consider them for their healthcare needs. Some travel agencies and healthcare providers offer bundled services that include flights, accommodation and medical treatments. These packages can save additional costs and simplify the planning process for international patients.

6. Hassle-Free Visa Processing

The streamlined visa process for medical tourists has significantly reduced bureaucratic obstacles, making it easier for international patients to travel to Kerala for treatment. This efficient visa processing facilitates smoother travel arrangements and ensures that patients can focus on their medical care rather than dealing with complex administrative procedures.

7. Internet Technology on Medical Tourism

Advances in Internet technology have changed how patients choose medical treatment. Patients can now easily access a wealth of information about healthcare facilities, medical procedures and service providers globally. Online reviews, hospital websites, and comparison tools allow patients to make informed decisions based on comprehensive data. This transparency helps build trust and confidence in the services provided by healthcare providers in places like Kerala. Electronic transmission of diagnostic results and medical records enables doctors in Kerala to review patient information prior to their arrival. This advance review helps plan treatment, assess risks, and ensure that the patient receives the appropriate care for their specific needs. Telemedicine and online consultations allow patients to communicate with doctors before traveling. This pre-consultation helps in understanding the treatment plan, addressing any concerns and determining the suitability of the selected medical facility. This internet system also enables patients to easily book flights, accommodation and travel arrangements online. The convenience of managing all aspects of their travel through digital platforms simplifies the process and reduces the stress associated with travel logistics.

8. Kerala's strategic proximity to major medical tourism source markets

Kerala enjoys a notable advantage in medical tourism due to its proximity to major source markets such as Europe and the Middle East. Unlike other leading destinations in South Eastern Asia, like Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, Kerala's closer geographic location can significantly impact the overall cost and convenience of treatment for international patients. When the treatment destination is closer to the patient's home country, the costs associated with travel and flying time are reduced. This geographical advantage translates to shorter, more direct flights, which are generally preferred by patients seeking to avoid lengthy and indirect travel routes. Additionally, Kerala's proximity often means simpler visa requirements compared to destinations that are farther away, which might involve more complex and time-consuming processes. As a result, patients are likely to favor Kerala over more distant locations for medical tourism, appreciating the cost savings and convenience associated with shorter travel times and straightforward visa procedures.

9. Cultural and Diasporic familiarity

Cultural and diasporic familiarity plays a significant role in the choice of medical tourism destinations. For many patients, aspects such as shared language, cuisine, customs, and religious practices can make a destination more appealing and comfortable. Kerala benefits from this cultural resonance in several ways- Many Keralites abroad maintain a strong connection to their cultural roots, including language. English, widely spoken in Kerala, serves as a common lingua franca, making communication easier for patients from the Middle East, Europe, and the USA. The availability of familiar cuisine can enhance the comfort level for international patients. Kerala's food, which includes a variety of traditional dishes, can provide a sense of home for those from the Kerala diaspora.

Shared cultural and religious practices can make Kerala a more inviting destination for medical tourists. The presence of familiar religious sites and cultural practices can contribute to a sense of familiarity and ease. Kerala's significant diaspora in the Middle East, Europe, and the USA often maintains strong ties to their place of origin. These individuals frequently prefer Kerala for medical treatment because it allows them to combine their healthcare needs with opportunities to visit family and friends. This "visit friends and relatives" (VFR) aspect makes Kerala an attractive option for those looking to reconnect with their cultural roots while managing their health. Overall, the cultural and diasporic connections enhance Kerala's appeal as a medical tourism destination, offering patients not only high-quality medical care but also a familiar and comforting environment.

10. Not having adequate insurance coverage in their home countries

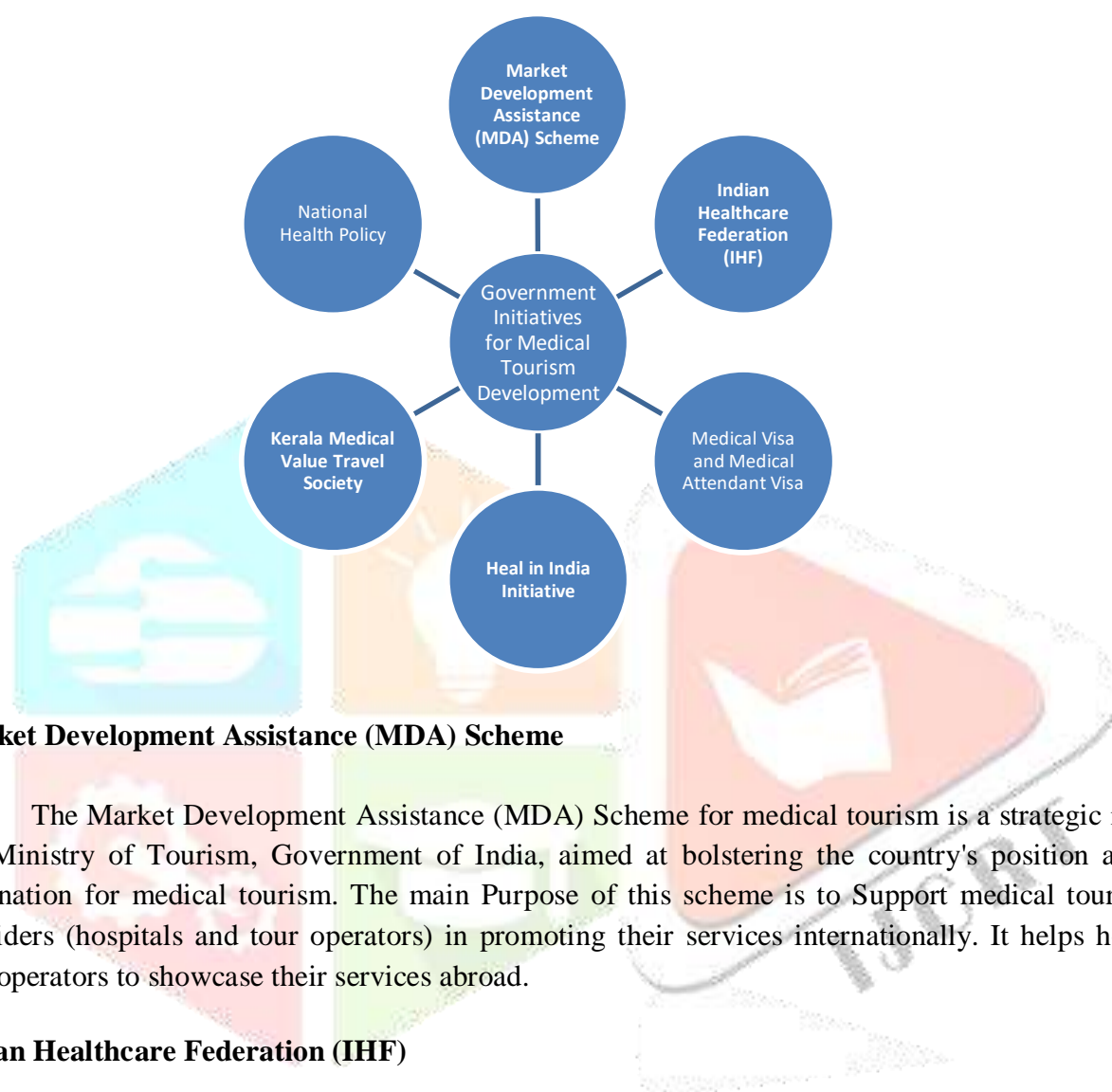
The rising number of individuals without sufficient medical insurance in their home countries often leads them to explore more affordable treatment options abroad. Kerala stands out as an attractive destination for these individuals due to its competitive pricing for medical services. For patients with limited or no insurance coverage, the cost of healthcare can be a significant burden. Kerala offers high-quality medical care at a fraction of the cost compared to many Western countries, making it a viable and appealing option for those seeking cost-effective treatment solutions. The affordability of medical procedures in Kerala can be particularly enticing for those who are uninsured or underinsured, helping them manage their healthcare expenses more effectively while receiving top-notch care.

11. Moderate Weather

Kerala enjoys a tropical climate with moderate temperatures and high humidity. The temperature typically ranges from 25°C to 32°C (77°F to 90°F) throughout the year. This stable climate is less likely to affect patients adversely compared to extreme weather conditions found in other parts of the world.

Role of government in the development of medical tourism

The role of government in the development of medical tourism is crucial and multifaceted. Governments play a significant role in shaping the policies, infrastructure, and marketing strategies that contribute to the growth of this sector. Here's a detailed look at the various ways in which government involvement can drive the development of medical tourism:



Market Development Assistance (MDA) Scheme

The Market Development Assistance (MDA) Scheme for medical tourism is a strategic initiative by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, aimed at bolstering the country's position as a leading destination for medical tourism. The main Purpose of this scheme is to Support medical tourism service providers (hospitals and tour operators) in promoting their services internationally. It helps hospitals and tour operators to showcase their services abroad.

Indian Healthcare Federation (IHF)

Indian Healthcare Federation (IHF) plays a vital role in supporting and promoting medical tourism in India. The Healthcare Federation is a non-governmental organization formed by the Union Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). They have prepared a data base of medical tourism service providers of the entire country with their web link published on the official website of the Ministry of Tourism (www.incredibleindia.org) for wide publicity and authenticity. Its main objective is to provide authentic and easily accessible information about medical tourism options in India.

Heal in India Initiative

Heal in India is an Initiative of the Government to promote the Medical Tourism in the country. Its Objective is to Promote India as a premier destination for medical tourism. It Provides information on healthcare facilities, supports visa processes, and integrates medical treatment with tourism experiences.

Medical Visa and Medical Attendant visa

The Govt. has relaxed visa policy to promote medical tourism industry. A visa-on-arrival scheme specially for medical tourists and their accompanying persons (upto four) has also been provided. The Indian government offers Medical and Medical Attendant visas for foreign nationals who want to visit India for medical treatment:

- **Medical Visa:** This visa is for people who are traveling to India for medical treatment at a recognized hospital or treatment center. The visa is usually issued for up to one year or the length of the treatment, whichever is shorter. Applicants must provide a letter of admission from a recognized doctor or hospital in India.
- **Medical Attendant Visa:** This visa is for people who are accompanying a patient who has been granted a Medical Visa. A maximum of two attendants are permitted per patient. The Medical Attendant Visa is valid for the same period as the patient's Medical Visa.

Kerala Medical Value Travel Society (KMVTS)

Kerala Medical Value Travel Society (KMVTS) is formed with the stakeholders of medical tourism and Government of Kerala with the objective to position Kerala as a prominent healthcare hub in the global medical tourism map. The society has representation from healthcare industry and secretaries of Tourism, Health, Industries of Government of Kerala as its ex-officio members. KMVTS helps to provide support and facilitate coordination among hospitals, healthcare providers and tour operators involved in medical tourism.

National Health Policy

Its ultimate goal is to improve healthcare quality and infrastructure to benefit both domestic and international patients. The policy's focus areas are strengthening healthcare facilities and infrastructure, ensuring high quality of care and patient safety, and promoting advancements in medical technology and treatment.

Conclusion

This study highlights the progress of medical tourism in Kerala and offers insights into why it has become a favorite destination for international patients and key initiatives taken by the government to promote medical tourism. India's healthcare systems are now globally renowned for safety, trust, compassion and excellence. The country attracts foreign patients, especially for surgical treatments, offering high-quality care at low prices and without long waiting times. Among the Indian states, Kerala is the most popular destination for medical tourists. This popularity is bolstered by several factors: recognized multispecialty hospitals, expert doctors and nurses, technologically advanced treatment facilities, affordable high-quality medical care, recognized international or national accreditations, affordable air travel, hassle-free visa processing, internet technology, cultural and diasporic familiarity. Kerala has a significant opportunity to build on its established reputation as a wellness destination and make a strong entry into the global medical tourism market. By leveraging existing strengths and addressing certain strategic areas, Kerala can position itself as a leading medical tourism destination.

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