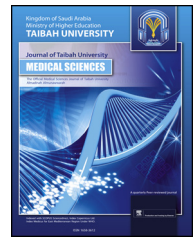




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Review Article

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: A potential destination for medical tourism



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المخلص

أصبحت السياحة الطبية عنصراً هاماً في الاقتصاد العالمي، بوجود أكثر من ٣٧ مليون رحلة ذات صلة بالصحة وإيرادات أكثر من ٣٣ مليار يورو كل عام. إن السفر للحصول على الرعاية الطبية في ازدياد مستمر في البلدان النامية والمتقدمة على السواء، حيث يسعى الناس في البلدان النامية للحصول على التقنية الجديدة والمهارات في البلدان المتقدمة، وفي المقابل يسعى الناس في البلدان المتقدمة الغنية إلى الرعاية الطبية في أماكن أخرى بسبب ارتفاع التكاليف وقائمة الانتظار الطويلة في بلدانهم. وتهيمن الهند، وماليزيا، وسنغافورة، وتايلاند على السوق الآسيوية. جذبت الإمارات العربية المتحدة مع بناء مدينة الرعاية الصحية في دبي الزبائن من الدول الغربية، ودول مجلس التعاون الخليجي، والشرق الأوسط، وشمال أفريقيا. ليست المملكة العربية السعودية من البلدان الأكثر شعبية في هذا المجال، على الرغم من توفر الميزات الأساسية لصناعة السياحة الطبية الناجحة، بما فيها من مستشفيات حديثة مجهزة تجهيزاً جيداً، ووجود قطاع صحي خاص مميز، وأطباء متخصصين ومتدربين بالخارج، وبيئة سلمية مستقرة. وهي أيضاً موطن الأماكن المقدسة الرئيسة للإسلام ومركز ديني مهم. يمكن أن تأخذ المملكة العربية السعودية القيادة في هذا السوق من خلال الجمع بين السياحة الطبية والسياحة الدينية. ليس فقط لـ ١٠٦ مليار مسلم (٢٣% من سكان العالم) ولكن أيضاً لبقية العالم. يظهر الاعتماد الحديث للعديد من المستشفيات السعودية من قبل اللجنة المشتركة الدولية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية التزامهم لتشجيع السياحة الطبية. يمكن أن تفتح السياحة الطبية الباب لثورة في زيادة الإيرادات في المملكة العربية السعودية، إذا ما أديرت بشكل صحيح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاقتصاد؛ السياحة الطبية؛ السياحة الدينية؛ الشرق الأوسط؛ المملكة العربية السعودية

Abstract

To perform a comparative study of Medical tourism in the Arab world with special reference to Saudi Arabia and find ways to upgrade medical tourism in Saudi Arabia. A comprehensive literature review and analysis of statistical data from Saudi Ministry of Health is performed.

With more than 37 million health-related trips and the generation of more than £ 33 billion each year, medical tourism has become an important element in the global economy. Travelling abroad to seek medical care is increasing steadily in both developing and developed countries: people in developing countries seek new technology and skills in developed countries, while people in rich developed countries seek medical care elsewhere because of high costs and long waiting lists in their home countries. India, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand dominate the Asian market, and the United Arab Emirates, with the construction of the Dubai Health Care City, attracts clients from western, Gulf Cooperation Council, Middle Eastern and North African countries. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is not one of the most popular countries, even though it has all the basic attributes for a successful medical tourism industry, including modern, well-equipped hospitals, a well-established private health care sector, foreign-trained doctors and specialists and a stable, peaceful environment. It is also home to the main holy places of Islam and an important religious center. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia could take the lead in this market by combining medical tourism with religious tourism, not only for the 1.6 billion (23% of the world's population) Muslims but also for the rest of the world. Recent accreditation of many Saudi hospitals by the Joint

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Commission International in the United States shows their commitment to promoting medical tourism. If properly managed, medical tourism could open the door for an income generation revolution in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Economy; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Medical tourism; Middle East; Religious tourism

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Introduction

Medical tourism is the practice of travelling to another country with the purpose of obtaining health care, including elective surgery, dental treatment, reproductive treatment, organ transplant and medical check-ups. It is not the same as “wellness tourism”, which involves visiting spas and undertaking homeopathic treatment and traditional therapies.¹ Carrera and Bridges² described health tourism as “the organized travel outside one’s local environment for the maintenance, enhancement or restoration of an individual’s well-being in mind and body”.

The reasons for medical tourism include^{3–5}: lack of availability of a particular facility in the home country; health care in the home country too expensive⁵; health need or procedure not covered by health insurance in the home country; desire to avoid long waiting lists controlled by the government^{6–8}; privacy and confidentiality in a far-off setting (for e.g. plastic or cosmetic surgery, fertility treatment, gender assignment procedures and drug rehabilitation)⁹; lack of availability of a specific diagnostic manoeuvre in the home country, regardless of whether treatment is required; combining tourism with an elective procedure (e.g. in Israel, people can have medical treatment and also visit some of the holiest places in the world)^{10–12}; annual or routine medical check-up for healthy people¹³; and screening for specific diseases in cases of a family history.¹⁴

Choice of a suitable country for medical tourism

When a person decides to undertake medical tourism, the first step is to select a destination. This depends primarily on the availability of the desired facility, cost and technical excellence. A blind decision to select a more developed country for medical tourism is being replaced by local and regional hubs or centres of medical tourism, which attract people from specific regions. Medical tour operators play an important role in choosing countries and may also persuade people to go to specific hospitals and hotels with which they have business contracts.⁷ As far as professional excellence is concerned, the hospital chosen should be assessed and accredited by a dependable, independent external accreditation body. In international health care accreditation, the quality of health care providers and programmes is ascertained globally. These bodies certify not only hospital services but also a wide range of health

care programmes, including primary care, medical transport and ambulatory care. Accreditation Canada (formerly known as the Canadian Council on Health Services Accreditation) is the oldest of such agencies. Others include the Joint Commission International based in the USA, QHA Trent Accreditation in the United Kingdom, the Australian Council for Healthcare Standards and the Society for International Healthcare Accreditation. Some hospitals have multiple international accreditations in order to attract people from many regions. Many countries are applying for international accreditations in order to boost their medical tourism industry. For example, in 2007, at least 15 hospitals in India and 5 in Thailand had Joint Commission International accreditation, whereas there are now 20 hospitals in India and 18 in Thailand,¹⁵ to meet the growing demand. The accreditation is reviewed every 3 years. Table 1 lists the numbers of hospitals with accreditation by Joint Commission International in August 2012.

It should be noted that affiliation with a reputable agency does not necessarily mean that a country or hospital will receive more clients; this also depends on tourism authorities, who use their own tactics to attract patients, regardless of accreditation, such as by offering full services, including any bookings that patients and their families might require, flights, car services, accommodation, clinic appointments, interpreters and recreational activities. Hospitals may also advertise themselves, and tour operators and hospitals may have mutual agreements. Sometimes, the popularity of a region may influence the selection of destination. For example, although China has few accredited hospitals, it attracts many patients from neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Viet Nam, where people consider that China is more advanced than their own country. Regional or global impact is important and can sometimes surpass accreditation. For example, Germany has few accredited hospitals but

Table 1: Countries and numbers of hospitals with Joint Commission International accreditation in August 2013.

Country	Number of accredited hospitals
Bahrain	1
Bangladesh	1
China	16
Egypt	3
Germany	3
Indonesia	5
Israel	7
Jordan	9
Kuwait	2
Lebanon	2
Malaysia	6
Qatar	5
Pakistan	1
Republic of Korea	13
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	42
Singapore	14
Taiwan	12
Thailand	18
Turkey	39
United Arab Emirates	39

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