

UAE Gears Up for Global Healthcare

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The UAE has great potential to emerge as a regional centre of medical tourism with its fast developing infrastructure and state-of-the-art hospitals and medical services. But there are significant challenges up to that slot

Experts say that with unified efforts, stricter regulation and effective marketing strategy to promote country as a favourite destination to the outside world, the country can emerge as one of the top medical tourism destination.

Medical tourism is one of the fastest growing segment in the healthcare business. A recent report on it stated that by 2017, over 16 million Americans could be travelling overseas for medical care. People from other countries equal to or greater than that amount will also be traveling around the world for medical care.

Medical tourism, medical travel, health tourism or global healthcare are terms initially coined by travel agencies and the mass media to describe the rapidly-growing practice of traveling across international borders to obtain health care.

Such services typically include elective procedures as well as complex specialised surgeries such as joint replacement (knee/hip), cardiac surgery, dental surgery, and cosmetic surgeries. However, virtually every type of health care, including psychiatry, alternative treatments, convalescent care and even burial services are available.

As a practical matter, providers and customers commonly use informal channels of communication-connection-contract, and in such cases this tends to mean less regulatory or legal oversight to assure quality and less formal recourse to reimbursement or redress, if needed.

Over 50 countries, including the UAE, have identified medical tourism as a national industry.

However, accreditation and other measures of quality vary widely across the globe, and there are risks and ethical issues that make this method of accessing medical care controversial. Also, some destinations may become hazardous or even dangerous for medical tourists to contemplate.

UAE poised for Growth

The official statistics shows that the UAE with oil driving its diversified economic growth is in a comfortable position to offer such services to the neighbouring as well as outside world.

With respect to hospitals, the number of hospital beds in Dubai is expected to nearly double last year's capacity, from 2,934 in 2007 to 6,108 by 2010, thanks to the establishment and expansion of nine hospitals in Dubai and nine more at Dubai Healthcare City.

A report issued by the information centre of Abu Dhabi Chamber of commerce and Industry (ADCCI) expected that the country's medical tourism to grow by 15 per cent annually, in line with the increase of tourists' demand on such tourism.

The UAE is eager to gain a slice of this growing market and is quickly moving to bring its health care sector up to international standards. In the last three years, 14 hospitals in the UAE have been accredited by the Joint Commission International (JCI) in the US, one of the world's leading accreditation organisations.

The latest of these is Shaikh Khalifa Medical City in Abu Dhabi, which recently received JCI status for its surgical pavilion, medical pavilion and outpatient speciality clinics.

Abu Dhabi's healthcare system consists of an extensive network of hospitals, clinics and medical facilities throughout the emirate. The capital strives to offer highest quality healthcare at any of its private and public hospitals and clinics.

Currently Abu Dhabi has seven government hospitals and equal number of private hospitals. The government hospitals boast around 2,000 bed capacity.

Dubai has also teamed up with Harvard Medical School to operate Dubai Healthcare City, a 435-acre state-of-the-art 'centre of excellence' for clinical and wellness services, medical education and research aimed at competing with low-cost health care providing countries in Asia.

Currently Dubai has six public hospitals, New Dubai Hospital, Rashid Hospital, Al Maktoum Hospital, Al Wasal Hospital, Al Baraha Hospital, and Al Amal Hospital with a collective built-in capacity of 1,717 beds.

"The UAE's Ministry of Health is at the forefront of developing the necessary infrastructure to attract medical tourists," said Nasser Khalifa Al Budoor, Assistant Secretary, International Relations and Health Affairs at the Ministry of Health addressing World Global Health Travel Congress in Dubai.

"We'll be ready to start receiving medical tourists coming here with their families, whether for plastic surgeries, knee replacements or treatment of cardiovascular diseases.

"We have so many hospitals like John Hopkins, Harvard, where some of the biggest names are working," Al Budoor noted.

"In the past the Middle East has never been considered a destination for medical tourists but the situation in the UAE had completely changed. People would go to London for shopping with their families and receive a check up or undergo a small operation. Now Dubai is ready for this. We have so much to offer now, with certified hospitals from international agencies," he said.

Similarly, a recent report by Dubai's Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing said that the UAE's healthcare sector is set to attract over 11 million tourists seeking medical treatment in the UAE between now and 2010.

International competition

The UAE also faces challenges being the new kid on the block in a fierce market where other countries already have a well-established history of offering medical tourism. Thailand, which received 1.2 million medical tourists in 2006, has gained a reputation for offering the best of both worlds -- inexpensive plastic surgery combined with a five-star beach holiday.

Singapore, known for its high quality healthcare system, consistently earns high marks in international surveys of medical tourists. It is aiming to attract one million foreign patients a year by 2012.

India has also carved a niche as a world leader in medical tourism. Estimates of the value of medical tourism to India go as high as \$2 billion a year by 2012.

These countries have a huge competitive advantage compared to the UAE in terms of the price of medical care. For example, the average cost of heart by-pass surgery in the UAE is \$44,000, compared to \$18,500 in Singapore, \$11,000 in Thailand, and \$10,000 in India.

The ADCCI report recommends establishing new hi-tech hospitals, hotels and resorts chain with specialist managements, building more institutions and pharmaceutical factories, beside organise more conferences, workshops and training courses.

The report also recommends easing issuing of the visit visas for the medical tourists, and encouraging investments in the treatment tourism sector for both local and international investors.

The Ministry of Health enacted tougher measures against illegal clinics and uncertified doctors, particularly cosmetic surgeons, in a bid to regulate the health industry.

The government has made it mandatory for all medical practitioners and pharmacists to get insured against the medical errors.

The medical tourism needs is a focussed strategy which facilitates coordination between the government, hospitals, and the tourism authorities.

Quality and cost are the key criteria that medical tourists look for, and the UAE faces hurdles on both fronts. Despite, the rising number of hospitals receiving accreditation, the UAE is still struggling to establish a reputation as a safe destination for medical treatment.?

By Aneela Batool

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