

Book Review

Medical Tourism in Developing Countries

Bookman, M.Z. and Bookman, K.R. (2007)

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This book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One begins with a broad introduction to medical tourism. The conceptual definitions, parameters of the study, and introductory global trends set the stage for the remaining six chapters. In this book, medical tourism is “loosely defined as travel with the aim of improving one’s health” (p.1). It also views medical tourism as an economic activity that entails trade in services and represents two economic sectors namely medicine and tourism. Notably, ten case studies selected in this book as medical tourism destinations were introduced. These countries are Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, India, Jordan, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Thailand. Interestingly some of these countries are called emerging markets, and India is a member of the high-growth economies comprising Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) group.

Chapter Two is titled ‘Plastic surgery is not peanuts: Economic growth and dependency’. This chapter explores the theory that links international trade in medical and tourist services to economic growth. Given the nature of trade in medical services, dependency issues raised by social scientists during the 1960s and 1970s call for a rethinking. It is argued that the sale of high-tech medical services to foreigners is different from the export of a cash crop such as peanuts and thus will not create the dependency associated with cash crops. In Chapter three, ‘Offshore doctors: The demand for medical tourism’ is the focus. The authors explore the demand for the medical tourism, where an analysis of *who* travels and *why* is presented. The factors influencing the demand for medical tourism as a whole are compared to the determinants of demand for medical tourism for any given destination.

Moreover, Chapter Four basically discusses the supply side of medical tourism. The role of the public sector and private practitioners are revisited. On top of that, the cooperation between these sectors is highlighted and it is viewed as *condition sine quatum*. This indispensable cooperation and collaboration between the private and public sectors is analysed with an eye on the best strategy, to ensure that medical tourism is implemented with best practices that promote sustainable growth. In developing countries, these two sectors are placed into global context since both the public and private medical establishment operates within a framework set by international organisations and both are active in tapping from foreign, physical, and human resources that are monitored, controlled and governed by international laws and regulations. More importantly, the nature and reasons for medical tourism relationship to the tourist industry are clearly explained.

The next chapter is interesting and it deals with the advantages of promoting medical tourism. For example, it starts by asking, “Why Malaysia attract medical tourists while Mauritania does not?” (p.95). In providing answer to this question, the strengths or advantages of

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the selected destination case studies face when promoting and marketing their medical tourism potentials are discussed. These strengths include competitive prices, human capital – quality and quantity of labour for medical tourism, domestic research and development, developed physical infrastructure and world class health facilities, developed political and legal institutions, market economies, tourist appeal (including friendly citizenry), the confluence of high-tech medicine and traditional healing just to mention a few. Another take away from this chapter is that it provides the conditions under which medical tourism thrives and experiences growth through different strategies, such as technological change and medical innovation.

Chapter Six opens with a discussion on the obstacles of promoting medical tourism by the developing countries that have chosen medical tourism as a foreign earning sector of the economy. Although, the merits have been addressed in the previous chapter, this does not indicate that the selected destinations face no challenges in the promotion of medical tourism in an attempt to have a share of the global tourism market hitherto dominated by the developed economies. It was crystal clear that there were several roadblocks, both within and at international scenes – these have to be overcome, circumvented, and otherwise dealt with. These hurdles include international regulations- patents, international standards, accreditation/ or credentialing – just as hospitals use accreditation to signal quality, medical staff use credentials and licenses for the same purpose. Others are health insurance, legal recourse and protection of patients' rights, entry requirements and transportation. For example, the Indian government had cumbersome visa restrictions and inadequate transportation services these are hindrances to the development of trade in medical tourism service.

The last chapter focuses on the inequalities in health care and the role of macro-economic policy. This chapter mentions the potential of medical tourism to reduce the problem of public health institutions. While it undoubtedly adds to the challenges faced by the public health sector (by reinforcing a two-way health-delivery system), medical tourism can contribute to the solution of health-care crises provided that a profitable venture can be harnessed, with the appropriate macro-economic policy to support the funding of public health. By following this path of economic policy, the pressures on the budgetary allocation on the public health will reduce and this will help in providing widespread basic health services. Another point of importance in this chapter is that it explores the relationship between medical tourism and public health with regards to both the crowding-out (medical tourism brings in foreign currency) and crowding-in (medical tourism can improve and expand public health care) effects. It is argued that medical tourism provides the capacity and opportunity to alleviate health-care problems in countries that have the incentive and facilities to tap into this global market.

With a closer look at each of the seven chapters, the political economy perspective becomes apparent. Such a scenario highlights the indispensable role played by the existing political establishments at the local, state, national and international levels in the provision of medical tourism. In fact international organisations such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and the World Health Organisation developed the framework for the consumption and provision of medical tourist services. This is followed by the policy formulated by the national government of each country, while the local government administrations are in charge of implementation. The book's political economy bias comes from its emphasis on legal matters mainly associated with consumers from litigious destinations such as United States and other developed countries. Throughout the seven chapters, medical tourism is positioned in the international context and the breath of the medical sector is clear, both in fact and theory.

As pointed out by the authors, one major weakness of the book is that the methodology adopted raised some issues. For example, given that medical tourism is a new field, it appears

that there are no reliable and comparable statistics available. Interviews with the industry and government leaders especially at hospitals that attract foreign tourists formed the source of identifying what is and what is not medical tourism. The book also relied on media reports that have become visibly extensive as sources of data gathering. Despite the limitations of data gathering, the content of this book attempts to be empirical and relies heavily on data obtained from the private sector industry.

In conclusion, this book has addressed an interesting subject from the perspective of contemporary issues in tourism in general, with the case studies of ten developing countries. The focus on the emerging economies makes it an exceptional reference for tourism students, lecturers, tourism policy makers, and practitioners in the medical tourism. In view of the issues addressed by the authors, this book is recommended to the wider audience as a must read.