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THE ROLE OF HEALTH TOURISM TRAVEL AGENCIES IN HEALTH TOURISM

Abstract. In today's world, health tourism is rapidly gaining popularity. Patients travel internationally to access various healthcare services and treatments, such as medical procedures, cosmetic surgery, dental care, thermal tourism, and spa-wellness services. One of the critical factors contributing to a successful experience in the challenging and complex journey of health tourism is the role played by health tourism travel agencies. These agencies facilitate patients' access to international healthcare services, guide patients, organize their travel, and offer personalized solutions to meet their needs. In addition to coordinating logistics, travel agencies help ensure a seamless healthcare experience by addressing cultural and language barriers and improving communication between patients and healthcare providers. This study aims to define the roles and responsibilities of health tourism travel agencies, emphasizing their growing importance in the global healthcare landscape.

Keywords: *Health Tourism, Medical Travel, Travel Agency, Cosmetic Surgery, Spa-Wellness*

Introduction:

Patients around the world travel internationally to access various health services and treatment options. This trend has given rise to the growth of medical tourism, where patients seek medical treatments, surgeries, and wellness services in countries outside their home region. Health tourism agencies play a pivotal role in facilitating these journeys by acting as the first gateway to accessing medical care abroad. These agencies not only guide patients through the process but also tailor solutions to meet their specific needs, contributing to the overall success of the health tourism experience (Kılınç & Koçarslan, 2022). By considering factors such as cultural tours, proximity to their residence, and recommendations from trusted individuals, health tourism agencies help patients make informed decisions about their medical treatments (Boyacı, 2021). In doing so, they contribute significantly to the growth and development of health tourism by simplifying the access to healthcare services in different regions (Özdemir, 2021).

The benefits of health tourism extend beyond planned medical needs, as it also caters to emergency or unplanned health issues. Health tourists, as they are called, may find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding and navigating the complexities of the medical tourism industry. Therefore, the medical tourism industry bears the responsibility of providing

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better guidance to these patients (Snyder et al., 2011). The movement of health tourists across international borders and the mobility of healthcare providers form the two key aspects of international healthcare mobility (Snyder et al., 2011). Health tourism has been praised for promoting patient choice in medical facilities, providing access to treatment alternatives not available locally, accelerating access to healthcare, and fostering global competition in the health sector (Turner, 2007).

Here are some of the key advantages of health tourism:

1. Access to a Wider Range of Medical Services: Medical tourism provides patients with access to treatments and procedures that may be limited or unavailable in their local communities. This enhances patient choice and allows individuals to receive higher-quality or specialized healthcare services.
2. Accelerated Care: In some countries, long waiting periods for certain medical treatments can be a significant issue. Medical tourism offers patients the opportunity to receive faster medical care, which can be crucial in cases of urgent medical conditions or life-threatening illnesses.
3. Global Competition: Medical tourism increases global competition in the healthcare industry. Hospitals and clinics, driven by the desire to attract international patients, improve the quality of services offered, thus raising overall healthcare standards.
4. Lower Costs: Medical tourism is often associated with lower healthcare costs in certain countries, allowing patients to access the same or even superior quality of care at more affordable rates (Turner, 2007).

Additionally, wellness tourism is gaining momentum alongside medical tourism. Patients not only seek treatments for illnesses but also aim to maintain and improve their overall well-being through wellness services such as thermal baths, spa treatments, and wellness resorts. Wellness tourism focuses on enhancing physical and mental health, and health tourism agencies facilitate this process by organizing tailored services for patients, making their experience as seamless and beneficial as possible.

With the rise of digital healthcare solutions, health tourism is also being transformed by telemedicine. This allows patients to consult with healthcare providers virtually before embarking on their medical journeys, streamlining the process and improving patient satisfaction. Such advancements further emphasize the importance of health tourism agencies in coordinating and managing both the logistical and medical aspects of healthcare travel.

Health Tourism

In recent years, health tourism has been the fastest-growing sector within the overall tourism industry. As more people travel internationally for medical treatments, the importance of health tourism continues to increase (Tengilimoğlu, 2021). Health tourism refers to individuals traveling to different countries for medical care. This sector has gained popularity due to factors such as travel convenience, medical technological advancements, and contemporary approaches in healthcare services (Polo Peña et al., 2023). More broadly, health tourism refers to the travel undertaken by individuals, also known as "health tourists," who wish to maintain their health physically, mentally, and socially, or those who seek to restore lost health through medical services outside their home country for at least 24 hours (Türk & Uymaz, 2023).

Health Tourism Travel Agencies

Health tourism travel agencies are private sector organizations that offer various healthcare services to their clients and handle the organization and coordination of these services. These agencies typically leverage their expertise in the health tourism sector to provide comprehensive

health tourism service packages. These packages may include air and ground transportation, travel visas, hotel accommodations, assistance from a local company representative in the destination country, the transfer of medical records to treating doctors, and negotiation of prices for the medical procedures that health tourists decide to purchase (Turner, n.d.).

Health Tourism Travel Agencies and Their Services

Health tourism agencies provide a range of services to facilitate the international accessibility of health services for patients seeking treatments or wellness services abroad. These agencies work to improve the overall experience of health tourism by managing travel logistics and addressing the specific medical needs of patients (Polo Peña et al., 2023; Poongodi, 2020). The most common services offered include:

- **Medical Treatment and Surgeries:** Health tourism agencies assist clients by guiding them through the selection of medical facilities and specialized doctors for treatments and surgeries. These agencies help patients choose the right health centers that best meet their medical needs.

- **Aesthetic Surgery and Beauty Tourism:** Cosmetic and beauty tourism is one of the primary services provided by health tourism agencies. These services connect clients to facilities that offer plastic surgery, dermatological procedures, and hair transplants, acting as a bridge between the patient and the service provider.

- **Dental Tourism:** Dental treatments are a significant part of medical tourism. Agencies help clients find the right dental clinics, provide logistical support, and manage the journey for those seeking dental care abroad.

- **Thermal Tourism:** Agencies specializing in thermal tourism connect customers to facilities that offer the healing benefits of thermal waters. They provide support to clients who seek to take advantage of these wellness offerings for relaxation and healing purposes.

- **Wellness and Spa:** Health tourism agencies also advise clients on wellness and spa services, offering access to facilities that provide various wellness treatments aimed at improving mental and physical health.

In addition to these services, health tourism agencies play a crucial role in ensuring access to quality healthcare services and post-treatment care. They are key players in facilitating and promoting access to these specialized services, addressing the unique needs of medical tourists and making the entire process more streamlined.

By offering tailored medical and wellness tourism packages, travel agencies improve patient care, assist in travel coordination, and support patients throughout their medical journeys. Additionally, agencies contribute to the development of health tourism by ensuring that patients receive high-quality care and individualized treatments, thus promoting the growth of the sector on a global scale. They often work in collaboration with local tourism operators to ensure that the patient's experience is holistic, combining healthcare services with leisure and cultural experiences.

The Role and Responsibilities of Health Tourism Travel Agencies

Health tourism is a vast market with an economic size exceeding 200 billion dollars globally, with numerous stakeholders involved. In this industry, the businesses that integrate health and tourism sectors and provide sectoral logistics are health tourism intermediary organizations, such as travel agencies (Aladağ Bayrak et al., n.d.).

The marketing strategies targeting health tourists typically focus on elements like costs, quality of care, and medical qualifications, which are communicated through customized websites

and social media platforms. Health tourism travel agencies are often the first point of contact for potential medical tourists, providing crucial information and guidance.

These agencies offer a comprehensive range of services to ensure that patients have a safe and comfortable experience while accessing international healthcare services. From organizing travel logistics, such as flights and accommodations, to coordinating medical treatments, health tourism agencies play an integral role in supporting the journey of health tourists and ensuring a positive experience. They also ensure the seamless integration of travel with medical care, catering to the unique needs of each client, which may include post-treatment care and wellness services.

Adding more, these agencies are increasingly responsible for ensuring that their clients' experiences are culturally appropriate and personalized, often providing language assistance and local guidance to ensure smooth interactions with healthcare providers in foreign countries. Their role extends beyond logistics to include offering peace of mind, reliability, and safety, thus building trust in international healthcare systems.

By facilitating access to high-quality medical care and travel, health tourism agencies are key players in promoting and developing the global health tourism sector.

Health Tourism Travel Agencies Services

These agencies offer services to individuals seeking treatment or wellness services during travel, aiming to facilitate access to international healthcare, organize travel procedures, and improve the overall health tourism experience. They provide a range of options related to healthcare services, travel arrangements, and accommodation to meet the specific needs of patients (Polo Peña et al., 2023; Poongodi. P, 2020). Some of the most common services offered include:

Medical Treatment and Surgical Procedures:

Health tourism agencies guide clients in selecting appropriate medical facilities and expert doctors, helping them make informed decisions about the treatments they need. These services are designed to ensure that patients receive quality care that aligns with their medical requirements.

Aesthetic Surgery and Beauty Tourism:

Agencies facilitate services for aesthetic surgeries, including plastic surgery, dermatological treatments, and hair transplantation. Acting as intermediaries between healthcare providers and patients, they ensure that clients have access to the best options available.

Dental Treatment:

Dental tourism, where patients travel for dental care, is a major sector in health tourism. Agencies recommend dental specialists and organize logistics such as travel and accommodation, allowing patients to focus on their treatment.

Thermal Tourism:

Health tourism agencies connect clients with thermal facilities where they can benefit from the therapeutic effects of thermal waters. These services are particularly valuable for individuals seeking natural remedies for various health conditions.

Wellness and Spa Services:

For clients looking for relaxation and rejuvenation, agencies offer guidance on wellness and spa services. They recommend top-tier facilities where individuals can access treatments like massages, saunas, and holistic therapies designed to enhance well-being.

Health tourism agencies play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between medical tourists and service providers. Beyond facilitating medical care, they ensure that the entire travel process is smooth and comfortable. Many agencies also offer post-treatment care, assisting patients with recovery plans and follow-ups with medical professionals. Additionally, cultural sensitivity and

language assistance are crucial components of their service, helping to overcome potential communication barriers and ensuring that clients feel secure and understood throughout their healthcare journey.

As health tourism continues to grow, these agencies have become vital players in the global healthcare landscape, contributing to both the patient experience and the development of international health services.

Results

Unlike seasonal tourism sectors, health tourism is a year-round industry that stands out for its significant contribution to the economy. Health tourists are individuals who travel to other countries to receive medical services that may be difficult to access in their own countries, whether to maintain their health, treat an existing illness, or achieve physical and mental well-being through aesthetic procedures. Health tourism travel agencies play a key role in the decision-making process of these health tourists regarding destinations, as well as during and after treatment. These agencies facilitate the integration of the tourism and healthcare sectors. One of their main responsibilities is to manage the transfer of necessary documents and information between healthcare and tourism establishments, continuing this service until the tourists return home.

There is a need for further research to explore the specific role and impact of health tourism travel agencies within the context of health tourism (Özdemir, 2021).

Health tourism is a rapidly growing global industry that attracts millions of people annually due to various reasons such as the increasing cost of healthcare in developed countries, long waiting times for medical procedures, and the search for high-quality and specialized treatments available in certain regions. Countries such as Turkey, India, Thailand, and Hungary have become key players in this industry, offering a wide range of services from dental care to complex surgeries and wellness treatments at a fraction of the cost compared to countries like the US or the UK.

Key Factors Driving Health Tourism:

1. **Cost-Effectiveness:** One of the primary motivations for health tourists is the cost savings they can achieve. In countries like the United States, healthcare expenses can be exorbitant, especially for uninsured or underinsured patients. Health tourism provides an alternative where patients can receive similar or even superior treatments at a lower price.

2. **Quality of Care:** Many countries that are popular for health tourism have developed world-class medical facilities and attract highly trained medical professionals. For instance, countries like South Korea and Germany are known for their advanced medical technology and high standards of care, while Turkey has a growing reputation in cosmetic surgery and medical aesthetics.

3. **Accessibility and Shorter Waiting Times:** In some countries, patients face long waiting times for certain medical procedures, especially those that are not considered emergencies. Health tourism offers a solution by allowing patients to bypass these delays and receive timely treatment.

4. **Legal and Ethical Considerations:** While health tourism offers significant benefits, it also raises ethical and legal concerns. Some worry about the quality control of procedures in certain countries, the risks of medical malpractice, and the follow-up care required after a patient returns home. There is also concern that the industry may contribute to the commodification of healthcare.

5. **Cultural and Tourism Appeal:** Many health tourists also take advantage of the opportunity to combine medical treatment with leisure travel. Countries like Turkey and

Thailand are not only known for their healthcare services but also for their rich history, cultural experiences, and natural beauty, making them attractive destinations for tourists seeking both wellness and adventure.

The Role of Health Tourism Agencies:

Health tourism travel agencies have become increasingly important intermediaries in this process. Their role includes providing detailed information about healthcare options, assisting with visa procedures, arranging transportation, accommodation, and medical appointments, and ensuring the smooth coordination between the healthcare provider and the tourist. They also ensure that health tourists are fully informed about potential risks, legal responsibilities, and post-treatment care options.

As health tourism continues to grow, the role of these agencies is likely to expand. They may also face challenges such as maintaining transparency and trust, navigating the legal complexities of cross-border healthcare, and ensuring that tourists' expectations match the quality of care they receive. To better understand and enhance the effectiveness of these agencies, further research is necessary. This research could focus on improving their operational strategies, assessing customer satisfaction, and exploring new opportunities for innovation in the health tourism sector.

Conclusion

Health tourism represents a dynamic and evolving sector that provides significant economic benefits and enhances the accessibility of medical services for individuals seeking care beyond their borders. Unlike traditional seasonal tourism, health tourism operates year-round, catering to a diverse range of patients motivated by cost, quality, and timely access to healthcare. The integration of the tourism and healthcare sectors is crucial, with health tourism travel agencies playing a pivotal role in facilitating this process.

These agencies not only guide health tourists in their decision-making but also manage essential logistical operations, ensuring a seamless experience from initial inquiries to post-treatment follow-ups. As the demand for health tourism continues to rise, there is a pressing need for more in-depth research to better understand the specific roles and impacts of these travel agencies within the health tourism landscape. This research will help identify best practices, enhance service delivery, and address ethical considerations associated with cross-border healthcare.

Furthermore, as healthcare markets become increasingly competitive, health tourism destinations must focus on maintaining high standards of care and patient safety while also promoting their unique cultural and tourism offerings. Balancing these aspects will be key to sustaining growth and attracting a steady stream of health tourists. In conclusion, the health tourism industry presents both opportunities and challenges, and a collaborative approach among stakeholders—government bodies, healthcare providers, and travel agencies—will be essential for its continued success and evolution.

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ТУРИСТІК АГЕНТТИКТЕРДІҢ САУЫҚТЫРУ ТУРИЗМІНДЕГІ РӨЛІ

Аңдатта. Қазіргі әлемде сауықтыру туризмі тез танымал болып келеді. Пациенттер медициналық процедуralар, косметикалық хирургия, стоматологиялық көмек, термиялық туризм және спа-сауықтыру қызметтері сияқты әртүрлі медициналық қызметтер мен процедуralарға қол жеткізу үшін бүкіл әлем бойынша саяхаттайды. Сауықтыру туризмінің күрделі жолынан сәтті өтүге ықпал ететін маңызды факторлардың бірі-сауықтыру туризмі бойынша туристік агенттіктердің рөлі. Бұл агенттіктер пациенттерге халықаралық медициналық қызметтерге қол жеткізуіді жеңілдетеді, пациенттермен бірге жүреді, олардың сапарларын ұйымдастырады және олардың қажеттіліктерін қанагаттандыру үшін жеке шешімдер ұсынады. Логистиканы үйлестіруден басқа, туристік агенттіктер мәдени және тілдік кедергілерді жою және пациенттер мен денсаулық сақтау мамандары арасындағы байланысты жақсарту арқылы үздіксіз қызмет көрсетуге көмектеседі. Бұл зерттеудің маңызы-сауықтыру туризмімен айналысатын туристік агенттіктердің рөлдері мен міндеттерін анықтау, олардың әлемдік денсаулық сақтаудағы өсіп келе жатқан маңыздылығын атап өтү.

Кілт сөздер: сауықтыру туризмі, медициналық саяхат, туристік агенттік, косметикалық хирургия, Spa-Wellness

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РОЛЬ ТУРИСТИЧЕСКИХ АГЕНТСТВ В СФЕРЕ ОЗДОРОВИТЕЛЬНОГО ТУРИЗМА

Аннотация. В современном мире оздоровительный туризм стремительно набирает популярность. Пациенты путешествуют по всему миру, чтобы получить доступ к различным медицинским услугам и процедурам, таким как медицинские процедуры, косметическая хирургия, стоматологическая помощь, термальный туризм и спа-оздоровительные услуги. Одним из важнейших факторов, способствующих успешному прохождению сложного пути оздоровительного туризма, является роль туристических агентств по оздоровительному туризму. Эти агентства облегчают пациентам доступ к международным медицинским услугам, сопровождают пациентов, организуют их поездки и предлагают индивидуальные решения для удовлетворения их потребностей. Помимо координации логистики, туристические агентства помогают обеспечить бесперебойное обслуживание, устранивая культурные и языковые барьеры и улучшая коммуникацию между пациентами и медицинскими работниками. Цель этого исследования - определить роли и обязанности туристических агентств, занимающихся оздоровительным туризмом, подчеркивая их растущую значимость в мировом здравоохранении.

Ключевые слова: Оздоровительный туризм, Медицинское путешествие, Туристическое агентство, Косметическая хирургия, Spa-Wellness