

Behaviors of Medical Tourists, Who Use Medical Tourism Agencies in Thailand

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Abstract: This research is about a study of behaviors of medical tourists who use medical service and travel in Thailand. A group of samples in the research is mainly the medical tourists who use the medical tourism agencies in top private hospitals in Bangkok, Thailand. The results about the behaviors of the medical tourists will be analyzed for planning a marketing strategy in order to be a guideline in running business of the medical tourism agencies for conforming to the behaviors of the travelers. In the future, it will be profitable to the medical tourism in Thailand.

Key words: Medical tourists, medical tourism, medical tourism agencies, behaviors, Bangkok

INTRODUCTION

There are a lot of medical tourism services in many countries which send the patients to other countries where the medical or health services are better, lower expenses or less time of waiting. In some cases, the medical and recovering by traveling service are contained together. Ministry of Tourism and Sports has concluded the amount of foreign tourists who came to Thailand for the medical tourism in 1 year as 2,533.60 million people and the income was about 6 billion baht. In addition, it was expected that before 2015, Thailand would have the income about 100,000 million baht for being the center of medical hub.

Department of Health Service Support (2012) found that the first 5 places of people who came to receive the service are from Japan, USA, UK, the Middle East countries and Australia, respectively. Studying types of receiving the service in the hospitals found that the foreign patients chose the hospitals which are in Bangkok and the provinces with traveling reputation which can be divided into 3 groups; the foreigners who live in Thailand, some of the tourists and patients and groups of people who come for the service specifically. Plus, the famous medical services are Orthopedic surgery, Cardiothoracic surgery, Cosmetic surgery, Dentistry, Gastroenteropathy, Medical examination and so on which are shown in the (Fig. 1 and 2).

Therefore, almost of the famous hospitals which are chosen for the medical tourism service by Thai and foreign tourists have the International Affair but some hospitals hire the agents to cooperate the customers domestically and facilitate taking Thai and foreign

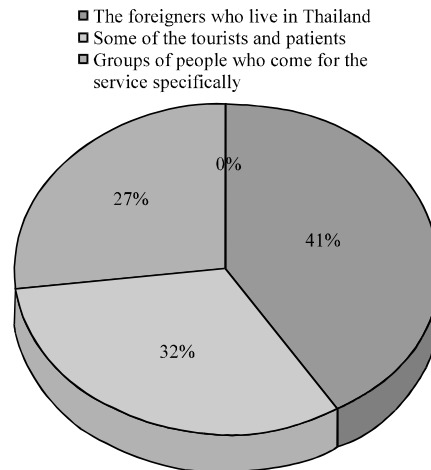


Fig. 1: Types of receiving the service in the hospitals (Department of Health Service Support, 2012)

customers come to receive the services in those hospitals. For example, Yanhee hospital which has hired the agent for the marketing purpose because the agent is the important opportunity to have the patients receiving the services and has an important role in cooperation and taking care of the customers both Thais and foreigners. The role of the agent is communication management, hospital and professional doctors recommendation and making the appointments for convenience of cooperation. In some cases, the agent may provide the residence and shuttle service from the time that the customers come to Thailand with the shuttle service from the residence to the hospital. In addition, there may be a city tour service or traveling program according to the customers' desires.

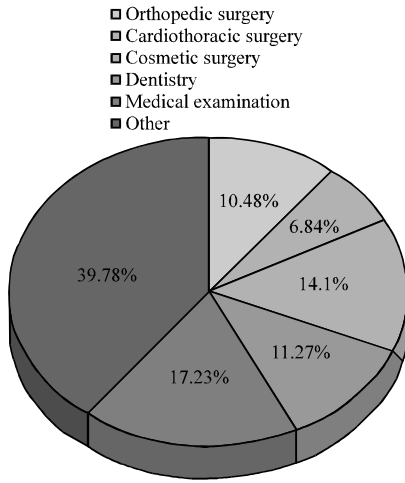


Fig. 2: The famous medical services (Department of Health Service Support, 2012)

This research was written in the purpose of reporting the behaviors of the tourists who came to Thailand for the medical tourism service via the medical tourism agency in order to take the service’s strategy to respond the desires of the tourists.

Literature review

Medical tourism: Medical tourism is a term that has risen from the rapid growth of international healthcare where people from all around the world are traveling to other countries to obtain general medical surgery, cosmetic plastic surgery and dental surgery at a fraction of the cost of healthcare in their home country. And while abroad, if physical conditions permit, patients can experience the interesting cultural attractions their destination country offers. More and more people are seeking the expertise of medical tourism companies to travel abroad as an affordable, enjoyable and safe alternative to having medical, dental and cosmetic surgical procedures done in their home countries. Medical tourism where patients travel overseas for operations, the reason because high costs and long waiting lists at home, medical tourism has grown rapidly, especially for cosmetic surgery. New technology and skills in destination countries include transport costs and internet marketing have all played a role of medical tourism. Several Asian countries are medical tourism destinations but most countries have sought to enter the market. Conventional tourism has been a by-product of this growth, despite its tourist packaging and overall benefits to the tourism industry have been considerable from medical tourism. Medical tourism is traveling internationally to obtain health care is becoming increasingly common due to ease and

affordability of travel (Connell, 2006). Medical tourism is defined as “organized travel outside of someone’s healthcare jurisdiction to enhance or restore health” (Carrera, 2006). Medical tourism is the set of medical activities in the destination often long distance or across the border to avail medical services with direct or indirect engagement in leisure, business or other purposes.

Theofanides and Papanikolaou (2012) in the past, medical tourist traveled to other counties for healthcare were typically interested in treatments that were either unavailable in their home country or were not covered by health insurance (including many cosmetic and dental surgeries). However, due to increased out of pocket healthcare expenses in America, along with long waiting lists in single-payer countries like the UK and New Zealand, many westerners are now traveling to developing countries like India, Thailand and the Philippines for procedures like heart surgery, knee replacements and hip resurfacing. According to Deloitte, the industry of medical tourism may be categorized into three groups:

- Outbound: patients travelling to other countries for medical care
- Inbound: patients travelling into the same country but in different regions for medical care
- Intrabound: patients travelling from other countries for medical care

Medical tourism in Thailand: Caroline Eden while most travellers aim to stay out of the hospital while on vacation, a growing number of people are crossing international borders for the purpose of attaining medical services. While most travellers aim to stay out of the hospital while on vacation, a growing number of medical tourists people who combine treatment with travel are crossing international borders for the sole purpose of attaining medical services which can range from a hip replacement to a tummy tuck.

The >89% of medical tourists travelled to Thailand, India or Singapore in 2010 with Bangkok and Singapore leading the pack. But the cost of hotel rooms and treatment are both far more expensive in Singapore than in the Thai capital, making Bangkok the most popular place for medical tourism in the world. Even after the devastating floods of 2011, 19 million tourists visited Thailand in 2011, a 20% jump from 2010 with an estimated 500,000 travelling specifically for medical treatment whereas of the 10.2 million tourists that visit Singapore each year, only 200,000 go to receive medical care. The trend is lucrative too. Medical tourism in Thailand is growing at a yearly rate of 16% while in financial terms the

foreign medical services sector is expected to make a whopping 100 billion baht by 2015. Currently, medical tourism makes up 0.4% of the GDP while tourism overall accounts for 6-7%, the third most important economic driver in Thailand. To compare, the Thai automotive industry accounted for 12% of GDP last year while manufacturing led the way accounting for 36% of GDP in 2011.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) which began promoting medical tourism in 2004 has a detailed medical tourism website that highlights many of the most popular treatments available including dental work, dermatology and cosmetic surgery as well as listing reputed hospitals, making it easy for potential visitors to decide on a procedure. Forward thinking in many of its approaches, TAT has also recently partnered with state-owned Krungthai Bank, the national bank of Thailand to offer tourists a debit card called the Miracle Thailand Card which offers some medical and life insurance coverage in case of an accident.

Western accreditation is also a vital component for confidence in undergoing foreign medical treatments and Bangkok's Bumrungrad and Samitivej hospitals were among Southeast Asia's first recipients of the United States' prestigious Joint Commission International (JCI) certification which is seen as the gold standard for healthcare service providers around the world. Now Bangkok has many JCI-accredited hospitals for medical tourists to book with.

Hospitals in Thailand are also very popular with those who travel from neighbouring Asian countries to seek treatment.

Bangkok hospital which specifically caters to medical tourists has an entire Japanese wing while Phyathai Hospitals Group has translators for 22 languages including Swedish, Khmer and Flemish as well as a team of English-speaking staff. It is also well known that when Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala of Nepal needed medical care and he chose to travel to Bangkok's Bumrungrad hospital for treatment.

The hospitals in Bangkok are some of the highest quality in the world, meeting or exceeding US standards, "said Steven Lash, CEO of Satori World Medical, a US-based medical travel company that sends patients to Bangkok as well as to seven other countries including Turkey and Mexico. All of the patients we have sent to these hospitals have given us excellent feedback on their procedures and their experiences at the facilities".

Medical tourism agency: The agencies in medical tourism can promote medical tourism emphasizing on all other tourist values of foreign destinations. Minor medical

services are often offered to the users of standard package of health care whereas the difference in the cost of medical services between the tourist's country of origin and the country which provides the service represents a significant saving often surpassing the cost of the tourist arrangement itself.

The role of the agent is to manage about coming to receive the service, recommend the hospitals and professional doctors, make the appointments and facilitate the cooperation. In some cases, the agent provides the residence and shuttle service for the customers for coming to Thailand and going to the hospitals. Moreover, there may be a city tour service or traveling program according to the customers' desire.

Keckley and Underwood divided the medical tourism agents into 4 groups which were specified the marketing strategies of each group differently as follow:

- Hotel group: for example, ITC-welcom group in India has extended the service business for being the medical tourism agent in order to facilitate between patients and facilitators
- Traveling group: for example, common wealth travel in Singapore has arranged traveling programs and routes for the medical tourism travelers
- Medical tourism group: for example, MedRetreat, Planet Hospital, Global Choice Healthcare and Bridge Health International which are internationally famous they are the middle men between the patients and the cooperate hospitals
- Medical group: for example, Bumrungrad hospital in Thailand and Apollo hospital in India have the complete medical services, plus there are several branches in many countries in order to attractive the travelers and patients in those countries to receive the service from them

Woodman tated that some agents perform as the representatives of some insurance companies such as Companion Global Healthcare Inc. is the affiliated company of Blue Cross Blue Shield Company. Moreover, the great insurance companies in USA tend to send their patients to receive the medical services abroad more and more which they can get the two-way incomes; the headquarters' incomes and the affiliated companies' incomes in the destination countries.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a qualitative and quantitative research in which the researcher interviewed the Medical Tourism

Agencies about service managements and interviewed with government agencies and private organization that involved with medical tourism and had the foreign travelers do the questionnaires about behavior of choosing services 100 sets of samples.

The results were the two methods together (Mixed Methods Research) to acquire accurate information and also in terms of qualitative research is to study the data from documentary and in-depth interview for a description and confirm the findings from quantitative research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researchers conducted a study and analysis of quantitative data from a questionnaires of 100 sets of samples were the medical tourists who use the services of medical tourism agencies in Thailand. The researchers have presented results of the study were divided into two steps:

- General information of the respondents
- General information about the tourists and method of choosing the service

Part 1 general information of the respondents: From the Table 1 found that the most of the respondent is female 60 people means 60% and male 40 people means 40%.

Table 2 found that the most of the respondent between the age of 31-40 years 39 people means 39% followed by the age between 41-50 years 23 people mean 23% and <30 years 12 people means 12%, respectively.

Table 3 found that the most of the respondent 67% are married means 39% followed by the single 22% and widowed/divorced 11%, respectively.

Table 4 found that the most of the respondent 72% are graduated with the Bachelor’s degree followed by Less than bachelor degree 19 and 9% are graduated with the Master’s degree, respectively.

Table 5 found that the most of the respondent 43% are bureaucrat/state enterprises’ official followed by self-employed 19%, private company’s employee 22% and retire only 1%, respectively.

Table 6 found that the most of the respondent 34% have \$5,001-10,000 followed by \$10,001-15,000 29%, \$15,001-20,000 26% and 11% \$<5,000, respectively.

Part 2 general information about the tourists and method of choosing the service: Table 7 found that the most of the respondent 38% use the medical service for medical examination (health check-up) followed by cosmetic surgery 34%, dentistry 13% and others 11%, respectively.

Table 1: Percentage of the respondent

Gender	Quantity	Percentage
Male	40	40
Female	60	60
Total	100	100

Table 2: Percentage of the respondent by age

Age	Quantity	Percentage
<30years	12	12
31-40 years	39	39
41-50 years	23	23
51-60 years	5	5
>61 years	1	1
Total	100	100

Table 3: Percentage of the respondent by marital status

Status	Quantity	Percentage
Single	22	22
Married	67	67
Widowed/Divorced	11	11
Total	100	100

Table 4: Percentage of the respondent by educational level

Educational level	Quantity	Percentage
Less than bachelor degree	19	19
Bachelor’s degree	72	72
Master’s degree	9	9
Doctor’s degree	0	0
Total	100	100

Table 5: Percentage of the respondent by current occupation

Current occupation	Quantity	Percentage
Private company’s employee	22	22
Bureaucrat/state enterprises’ official	43	43
Freelance	0	0
Self-employed	24	24
Student	0	0
Retire	1	1
Total	100	100

Table 6: Percentage of the respondent by rate of salary

Rate of salary	Quantity	Percentage
<\$5,000	11	11
\$5,001-10,000	34	34
\$10,001-15,000	29	29
\$15,001-20,000	26	26
\$20,001-25,000	0	0
\$25,001-30,000	0	0
>\$30,000	0	0
Total	100	100

Table 7: Percentage of the respondent by health problem or medical service

Health problem or medical service	Quantity	Percentage
Orthopedic surgery	0.00	0
Cosmetic surgery	34.00	34
Cardiothoracic surgery	0.00	0
Dentistry	13.00	13
Liver	0.00	0
Kidney	0.00	0
Medical examination	38.00	38
Gamete Intrafallopian Transfers (GIFT)	0.00	0
Cancer	0.00	0
Others, please specify...	15.00	15
Total	100.00	100

Table 8 found that the most of the respondent 56% use the medical tourism agency for price estimation and

Table 8: Percentage of the respondent by service do the respondent use via the agency (the respondent can choose >1 choice)

Service do you use via the agency	Quantity	Percentage
Hospital and professional doctor recommendation	53	53
Price estimation and cure appointment	56	56
Coordination for visa application (in the case tourists needs a visiting visa)	34	34
Checking for the rights of expense coverage of the insurance company	23	23
Providing residence	50	50
Providing shuttle service	43	43
Travelling program arrangement	30	30
Others, please specify...	5	5

Table 9: Percentage of the respondent by the reasons to choose the agency

What are the reasons you choose the agency	Quantity	Percentage
Reputation	54	54
Having contracts with hospitals which passed the international standard and are of quality	56	56
Ready to work and multilanguage staffs	58	58
Having full convenient services such as shuttle, residence, travelling program	50	50
Being transferred from your country	53	53
Fast service	57	57
Others, please specify...	0	0

Table 10: Percentage of the respondent by the channel

Channel	Quantity	Percentage
Website	84	84
Printing media	0	0
Television, radio, advertising media	0	0
Recommendation from your country's hospital	0	0
Recommendation from your friends	6	6
Others, please specify...	10	10
Total	100	100

Table 11: Percentage of the respondent by the respondent come to Thailand with whom

Who do you come to Thailand with?	Quantity	Percentage
Alone	12	12
Family	52	52
Friends	19	19
Family and friends	6	6
Others, please specify...	11	11
Total	100	100

cure appointment followed by hospital and professional doctor recommendation 53%, providing residence 50%, providing shuttle service 43% and coordination for visa application (in the case tourists needs a visiting visa) 34%, respectively.

Table 9 found that the most of the respondent 58% choose the agency because ready to work and multilanguage staffs followed by fast service 57% having contracts with hospitals which passed the international standard and are of quality 56%, reputation 54% and being transferred from your country 53%, respectively.

Table 10 found that the most of the respondent 84% know the medical tourism agency by website followed by other 10% and recommendation from your friends 6%, respectively.

Table 11 found that the most of the respondent 52 come to Thailand with the family followed by come to Thailand with friends 19%, come to Thailand alone 12% and come to Thailand with family and friends 6%, respectively.

CONCLUSION

From part 1 general information of the respondent found that the most of medical tourists who use the medical service in Thailand are female. By age the most of the respondent are 31-40 years and married. By current occupationage the most of the respondent are Bureaucrat/State enterprises' official and most of all holding a Bachelor's degree and rate of salary \$5,001-10,000.

From part 2 general information about the tourists and method of choosing the service found that the most of the respondent use the medical service for medical examination (health check-up) and the respondent use the medical tourism agency for price estimation and cure appointment followed by hospital and professional doctor recommendation. The medical tourists have a reasons to choose the agency because ready to work and Multilanguage staffs and most of all know the medical tourism agency by website and come to Thailand with family.

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