



Travel tonics

With more and more people seeking medical procedures overseas, **Liam Tappin** examines the growth of health tourism and highlights some of the destinations and healthcare groups that are leading the way in this thriving industry

In 2014, Patients Beyond Borders estimated that close to 11 million patients had crossed international borders in search of medical care, with the most travelled-for treatments being cosmetic surgery, cardiovascular and orthopaedic procedures, cancer and reproductive treatments, and dentistry.

According to Vivian Ho, Chief Development Officer at the Medical Tourism Association (MTA), “Travelling abroad for medical care and health services, referred to as

medical travel and health tourism, is an age-old practice, and in today’s global economy, it makes sense for an informed consumer to consider high quality, cost-effective care choices beyond borders.”

Indeed, with prices for medical procedures differing from country to country, the MTA Medical Travel Survey Report of 2013 found that nearly 80% of all health tourism was motivated by potential cost savings. In 2015, heart valve replacement surgery in South Korea was priced at US\$39,000,

while the same procedure in Malaysia was only US\$13,500. Similarly, heart bypass surgery in the US can cost up to US\$123,000, while the very same procedure in Mexico can be carried out for just US\$27,000.

Beyond the financial incentives, there are several other advantages that can be gained by seeking treatment overseas. These include avoiding lengthy waiting times; gaining access to medical staff and facilities that outshine local providers; and receiving treatment

options which, for one reason or another, are not available in a patient’s home country. Indeed, health tourism is a simple, cost-effective solution to many healthcare issues. And business is clearly booming, with Renée-Marie Stephano – the President and Co-Founder of the MTA – valuing the current medical travel industry at US\$50-65 billion, with an approximate annual growth of 20%.

COST-EFFECTIVE CONTINENTS

As the market expands, more affordable and better quality healthcare options flourish around the globe. Apollo Group (www.apollohospitals.com) is the frontrunner for exemplary integrated healthcare in Asia. They were India’s first corporate hospital and the catalyst for a private healthcare revolution throughout the country. Offering 10,000 beds

across 64 hospitals, Apollo has over 2,200 pharmacies and more than 100 primary care clinics, with this Indian healthcare giant treating well over 45 million patients since its inauguration in 1983.

Revered for its cardiovascular institutes, which are among the largest in the world, Apollo Group has performed over 100,000 heart surgeries, ranging from transplants and heart valve surgeries to coronary artery bypasses. Their transplant institutes have successfully carried out several firsts in India, such as the first transplant in acute liver failure and the first liver-kidney transplant.

As if these pioneering medical endeavours weren’t enough, it also flaunts some of the lowest prices for medical procedures. The average price of a hip replacement in India is US\$7,200 – a saving of close to US\$10,000 when compared to the equivalent

procedural costs in Thailand. A spinal fusion procedure, meanwhile, costs just US\$10,300 in India – an astonishingly small fee, especially when compared to the American equivalent of US\$110,000. Apollo continues to lead the way with its care of foreign patients, save them tens of thousands of dollars every year, without sacrificing quality of care.

A PERSONAL TOUCH

Asia isn’t the only region witnessing a health tourism boom, however. In 2013, the MTA estimated that Australia’s national economy received an injection of US\$26 million when upwards of 10,000 health tourists visited the country for various treatments and procedures. The 15% annual growth of the Australian healthcare market has prompted companies such as Ramsay Healthcare (www.ramsayhealth.com) to expand both their domestic and international operations.

Starting as a guesthouse-turned-psychiatric hospital in 1964, Ramsay Healthcare has become the largest provider of private medical care in Australia and one of the top five private hospital groups in the world,

with a total of 110 hospitals and 124 treatment centres.

Nurturing a company-wide philosophy of “People Caring for People”, Ramsay Healthcare prioritises personal care above all else. This sentiment resonates with patients, ensuring they are always regarded as individuals throughout their medical experience, and never just a customer. Financial incentives play a huge role in choosing various treatment options, but this personal approach to medical care has become increasingly important to international patients.

Pictured: It is estimated that 11 million people travelled abroad for a wide range of medical procedures in 2014, with overseas treatments offering patients better value, higher quality and shorter wait times

Similarly, Turkey’s Acibadem Healthcare (www.acibademinternational.com) aims to create a holistic medical experience for overseas patients. Complementary services provided by their International Patient Services Centres are dedicated to assisting health tourists ➤



throughout their stay. With translators for nearly 20 languages, they offer help with bills, insurance, travel, accommodation, and even facilitate communication between patient and physician after their flight home.

Producing the first Westernised private hospital in Turkey, Acibadem is a pillar of European medical care, comprising 13 medical centres and 18 hospitals. With an assortment of specialised centres of excellence, their flagship hospital in Istanbul is globally recognised for its work with risky pregnancies, IVF treatment and cardiovascular surgery.

Furthermore, medical prices in Turkey are significantly cheaper than the country's Mediterranean neighbours. In Israel, knee replacements and tummy tucks are priced at US\$25,000 and US\$10,900, respectively. Meanwhile, the same procedures are available in Turkey for half to one third of the price. Turkey's Ministry of Health are projecting that, by 2023, the number of health tourists visiting this medical hotspot will reach a staggering total of two million people.

QUALITY AS THE PRIORITY

Many elements influence a patient's decision to obtain medical treatment internationally, but the



search for quality is always key. While many healthcare facilities in developing countries are remarkably sophisticated, going above and beyond the international requirements, the level of quality in established groups like Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.org) in Rochester, Minnesota, is often considered unrivalled.

Indeed, a recent US News & World Report ranked Mayo Clinic among the best hospitals in the USA in their 2015-2016 ratings, awarding the hospital with number one rankings across eight specialities – more than any other

hospital in America. As the world's largest not-for-profit practice, it is championed as America's best hospital for endocrinology, gastroenterology, geriatrics, gynaecology, nephrology, neurology and neurosurgery, pulmonology, and urology.

In addition to its flagship hospital in Rochester, Mayo Clinic has major campuses in Scottsdale and Phoenix, in Arizona, and Jacksonville, in Florida. The Mayo Clinic Health System also operates affiliated facilities throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. In 2015, 1.3 million patients from

more than 140 countries attained high quality medical care by travelling to Mayo Clinic.

As more patients take advantage of the healthcare options available abroad, and the quality of international medical facilities continues to improve, the future of health tourism appears brighter than ever. ■

Above: One of the Mayo Clinic campuses in Phoenix, Arizona
Below: The most travelled-for treatments include cosmetic surgery, cancer treatment and orthopaedic procedures

