

Medical/ Health Tourism Service Sector – An Indian Case Study

Sushrut Hospital & Research Centre in Nagpur is a specialty Orthopedic Hospital specializing in Knee and Hip Replacement surgeries. It is situated right in the heart of the city in an area named Ramdaspath, in Nagpur city, India.

Dr. Sushrut Babhulkar, a world renowned orthopedic surgeon is the man behind the more than 2000 successful orthopaedic surgeries performed in the institute. Dr. Sushrut Sudhir Babhulkar, is a graduate and Post-Graduate (MS Orthopaedics) from Indira Gandhi Medical College, Nagpur. He then did his Masters Degree from Liverpool University, England M Ch (Orthopaedics) in 1994 and during the same time worked at various centers of Excellence in UK like Royal Liverpool University Hospital, Fazakarley Hospital etc. in 1995.

Dr. Sushrut is actively involved in joint replacement surgeries of Hips, Knees, Shoulders and elbows employing all varieties of implants like cemented and non-cemented options. The institute is a small but efficient hospital of 105 beds having five specialist doctors and about 50 support staff in various categories.

Of late with the concept of medical tourism gaining popularity, there has been a definite increase in the number of overseas enquiry that Sushrut Hospital is receiving and so far has successfully treated 8 European patients. Presented below is a brief summary of the procedures followed by Dr. Sushrut beginning with the arrival of the foreign patient in India right up to his departure to his native country.

Dr. Sushrut has opened a coordinating office in Mumbai that has a Medical Coordinator as well as a Travel Coordinator. The medical coordinator is a qualified medical practitioner who receives all the medical queries as well as is responsible for monitoring of the basic health parameter of the patient upon arrival in India, Mumbai being the first touch down destination for many foreigner travelers. Thus right from his arrival in India, Dr. Sushrut has ensured that the patient is in safe hands and feels assured of being under medical supervision. This motive behind this move is to encourage patients to come to Nagpur. An interesting fact presented by Dr. Sushrut Babhulkar is that it takes a patient 2 hours to reach any hospital in Mumbai from the airport whereas it takes only one and a half hours to reach Nagpur from Mumbai. Thus, other than the traffic congestion the patient is also spared the pollution of Mumbai. Moreover it has far less problems that a place like Mumbai has, important being traffic congestion and for a doctor, time is the most precious thing that can make a difference between wellness and pain.

The hospital has tie up with "Tuli International" for arranging the recuperation vacation to Kanha Tiger Resort. Regarding tie-ups for the stay of the patients, Dr. Sushrut is having discussions with top hotels in Mumbai like "Grand Hyatt" to put up "Level 1" patients and "Hyatt Regency" for accommodating "Level 2" patients as these hotels are situated close to the airport from where it shall be convenient for them to take a flight to Nagpur

The foreign patients undergo the surgery after completion of the preliminary tests usually on the 3rd day after his arrival in the hospital. On the 6th day, the patient has the option of either recuperating in the hospital or a package trip to Kanha Tiger Resort which is about 250 Kms from Nagpur and a very famous tourist destination. During his travel to Kanha, the patient is accompanied by an expert orthopedic surgeon, a physiotherapist and a nurse. On reaching Kanha, the doctors come back but the nurse stays on and returns along with the patient after 5-6 days of rest and relaxation in the lap of nature. The stitches are then removed on the 12th day and the patient then goes back to his native country, hale and hearty on the 13th or 14th day of his tour. Thus, within 15 days the patient fully recovers and is made pain free and mobile!

Dr. Sushrut uses the most advanced technologies in performing these surgeries, many of which are proprietary. The surgeries performed are computer assisted and he uses a special laminar air flow space suit to perform the complicated surgeries which assure zero infection. This technology even helps a doctor sitting thousands of miles away to watch the surgery

being conducted on his patient, whom he sends to India because of lack of expertise in his country.

The amazing thing about the surgeries performed by Dr. Sushrut is that it allows the patient a very high degree of mobility compared to the surgeries performed in foreign countries. For example a patient operated upon by Dr. Babhulkar is able to squat while the foreign surgeries allow the patient limited mobility of being able to sit on a chair. Thus the comfort and mobility offered by Dr. Babhulkar is unmatched in the world as of today.

As accreditation is an issue with the foreign patients who seek medical intervention, Sushrut Hospital has an ISO 9001-2000 certification and is pursuing the other essential accreditation required for a super specialty hospital promoting medical tourism.

The patients who have availed the services at Sushrut hospital are all praises and extremely excited about the experience they had in Nagpur. The wellness and comfort that they experience after having undergone the surgery is beyond description. The word of mouth publicity by the foreign patients is also helping in bringing new patients to seek medical assistance in Sushrut Hospital. Moreover, Dr. Sushrut Babhulkar also has an associate in Europe who recommends patients in need of knee, joint and total hip replacement, hip resurfacing surgeries to Sushrut Hospital.

Incidentally, since all the foreign tourists who have been treated by Dr. Sushrut were old, none took the recuperating trip to Kanha as they did not want to undertake an additional journey and preferred to return back to their home country as soon as possible. But the facilities provided by Hotel Tuli International at the Kanha tiger resort matches the best in the world.

Kanha tiger resort is a private initiative of Hotel Tuli International. The hotel on its part adheres to the rules that apply to the other resorts functioning in the state of Madhya Pradesh (MP) as the Kanha reserve is under the jurisdiction of the MP government.

Most of the visitors going to Kanha are foreigners, but it is also very popular among the local Nagpurians and visitors from other places in Maharashtra. Some people are also exploring the possibilities of having marriages organized in the resort

The resort employs substantial local people for the odd jobs that are required to be done at the resort. Therefore in terms of employment generation, the resort has contributed substantially in the social upliftment of the local population. In addition, many small service providers have sprung up on the roads leading up to Kanha, thereby creating secondary employment in the micro-region.

Kanha tiger resort being in the wilderness, there is an absence of a vibrant local market. But the tourist who comes to Nagpur helps himself in the huge shopping malls that have come up in Nagpur in the past couple of years. Moreover, Nagpur is also famous for its oranges and hence it is also known as the Orange City of India. The city also offers some exotic sweets that are a specialty of this region.

The other players of the medical tourism network who do not play a very active role in the present case study are the following:

- Local tour operators
- Local insurance agencies
- Local market and the
- Local guides

Though this case study does not have the involvement of all the probable network members that normally constitute a medical tourism service sector network, it has the potential of becoming an immensely popular and preferred destination, particularly for the people seeking knee and total hip replacement interventions.

The identified gaps/weaknesses and recommendations emerging out of this case study are presented in details below:

Weaknesses

- Preference for the metro cities by the foreign tourists

Many foreigners still prefer to get themselves treated in the metro cities of India rather than opting for the mini-metros or A class cities. The most important reason for this is the good flight connectivity offered by the metros. But this advantage is not without associated problems of:

- Traffic congestion (which is negligible in the A class cities)
- High levels of pollution (The A class cities fare very well as the levels of pollution are very low)
- Possibility of not being operated upon by the top doctor of a super specialty hospital (Smaller super specialty hospitals in the A class cities offer the surety that the operation will be performed by the most expert doctor of the hospital with the assistance of other specialist doctors, if needed.)

Recommendations: The powers that be of the A class cities should argue their case before the Ministry of Civil Aviation for increase flight connectivity. With the entry of the private players into the field of aviation, the chances of getting a favorable response to this demand are brighter than ever before.

- Perceived poor infrastructure in A class cities

The A class cities are perceived as having poor infrastructure development. On the contrary, it is the infrastructure of the metro cities that is under heavy stress as there is virtually no scope for horizontal infrastructure development in these cities, which mandates the development of tall sky-scraper buildings. The A class cities on the other hand, offer ample space for people willing to invest and develop the infrastructure and the cost of land is also comparatively much cheaper than in the metro cities.

Recommendations: The municipal corporation of the A class cities should realize the potential benefits of developing world class infrastructure and strive to strike collaboration with builders of their city in developing infrastructure that shall be in great demand in the years to come. Private builders too can try and tap the potential that the real estate market has to offer today.

- Disinterest/Lack of awareness of the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC)

When contacted, the MTDC officials of Nagpur were totally unaware of the concept of medical tourism. This lack of awareness is also reflected in their lackadaisical approach towards development of tourist locations in and around Nagpur, which has numerous wild life reserves like the Tadoba Andhari National Park, Totladoh Wild life reserve and Karmazari wild life park, besides famous pilgrimage locations like the famous temple at Ramtek, where lord Rama is believed to have rested during his 14 years of exile and the Dragon temple near Kamptee, which depicts the rich Buddhist heritage.

Recommendations: An in house awareness programme should be conducted for the MTDC officials to make them realize the tourist potential of Nagpur and its adjoining areas. The MTDC has ample funds to develop the tourist's hot spots under its jurisdiction. What is lacking is the will to put in hard work to develop new world class tourism facilities and maintain the existing ones. The State Ministry of Tourism also needs to be made aware of the increasing popularity of medical tourism so that state of Maharashtra does not lose out to other states in attracting foreign tourists.

- Lack of vigorous marketing by healthcare institutes

Dr. Sushrut Babhulkar strongly brought out the point that the healthcare institutes in Nagpur offering specialty medical interventions like Sushrut Hospital and Research Centre as well as other institutes run by individual expert doctors have not been able to market themselves well in the rapidly expanding market of medical healthcare providers. The primary reason attributed to this was the lack of time on the part of the doctor to look at this aspect.

Recommendations: There was a suggestion that there should be service providers who can help individual healthcare institutes in bringing their expertise before the world. The mutual benefits of this will be huge and shall go a long way in diverting medical tourists to the A class cities.

- Lack of coordination between the hotels and healthcare institutes

At the moment, the healthcare institutes and the hotels are operating independently of each other in Nagpur. The hotel has its own clientele and is not aware of the potential clients in terms of the medical tourists who come to Nagpur to avail medical interventions. Nagpur has two five star hotels, one situated at a stones throw from the airport and the other right in the heart of the city.

Recommendations: These hotels and the health care institutes should work in collaboration which will prove to be mutually beneficial for both the parties and the hotels will also do better if they can extend their services from merely providing accommodation to providing for the tourists journey to the nearby tourist hotspot and also a full time general practitioner to attend to medial emergencies, if any.

- Proactive role by the insurance companies

Nagpur boasts of a healthy presence of both government and private insurance companies. But these insurance companies as of today are only targeting the consumers in terms of the myriad healthcare policies that they have to offer. The medical cover by such insurance companies to a foreign tourist is virtually non-existent.

Recommendations: The insurance companies should set in place some kind of policy that will help in cutting down the window/waiting period of three months and they should be able to provide medical cover to the foreign patients seeking a major medical intervention. At the moment, it is felt that a major intervention in the insurance sector is needed with respect to providing insurance facilities to medial tourists.

Summarizing the above discussions, the general recommendations that will give a major boost to Indian medical tourism include the following:

- Working towards internationally recognized accreditation
- Regulatory bodies with teeth
- Better coordination between the ministries
- Co-operation between the different stakeholders of this service sector network
- Medical insurance reforms
- Vigorous marketing & information dissemination
- Sustainable development

This case study is an excellent example of an individual trying to promote medical tourism in his own special way. This has inspired many medical specialists of the region to come together and form a group and tap the tremendous potential that medical tourism holds of cities like Nagpur which is developing by leaps and bounds, the proof of which is that major companies are setting up their base here.

Annex I presents a brief interaction with Dr. Jaspal Arneja, a leading intervention cardiologist of Nagpur city, on his take on the medical tourism prospects and potentials of Nagpur city.