

Medical Tourism in Sri Lanka- Are We Ready Yet?

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A patient walks in to a hospital in Singapore with a swollen and painful knee. MRI scans are done and in an instant an Indian radiologist based in Bangalore goes through all the images. The reports are prepared within a day and by evening the patient gets an expert opinion on his knee by an internationally acclaimed radiologist living in India.

In another part of the globe, an American patient who requires plastic surgery plans on consulting a clever surgeon in Thailand. He visits Bangkok and as a part of the surgical package receives a bonus "Explore Thailand" tour during the post-operative period.

If you think that these two scenarios are from the future you are wrong. "Teleradiology Solutions" Bangalore is one of the leading companies which provide radiology reports. It serves many hospitals all over the world including Singapore General Hospital. Teleradiology analyses thousands of radiology images per month. Only an internet connection is used for the above service.

Sri Lanka has the skilled medical workforce to start medical tourism big time. We also have the tourism attractions to capture the hearts of all medical tourists

Bumrungrad Hospital Bangkok serves 1.1 million patients every year out of which the majority are from different parts of the globe including USA. This hospital boasts of more than 200 USA accredited doctors. Medical tourism is one of the fastest developing industries in Asia and it's a fine way of making use of the elite medical workforce in any country. This is also a great method of bringing in foreign revenue to a country. So what keeps Sri Lanka and medical tourism apart? I will briefly highlight a few reasons why medical tourism is still far from reality here.

First of all if we do an analysis of countries which have abundant "Medical Tourists", USA might emerge as number one. For the American citizens to reimburse their medical costs through insurance schemes we should offer our services accordingly. Even a piece of gauze used to cover a surgical wound has defined specifications and dimensions in their insurance acts. We have to embrace these guidelines at least to a certain extent.

The doctors who offer their services should have recognition from the said country.(i.e. An American qualified Sri Lankan doctor) In both instances I have cited above, the specialists are US qualified local doctors. This might be an issue in Sri Lanka where most doctors receive specialist training in either UK or Australia. And most non specialist doctors are usually locally qualified graduates without degrees from other countries.

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To attract medical tourists there's a lot that needs to be done in the local tourism industry. Take for an example accessibility for disabled patients. Still the majority of hotels lack even wheelchair ramps at the entrance. And about transporting a wheel chair bound patient - we do not have vehicles with wheel chair hoists or wheelchair accessible vehicles for the patients to drive themselves. The old fashioned method of lifting a disabled patient in to a vehicle seat is now historical. If we consider major tourist attractions very few buildings/ venues are meant for disabled patients.

Sri Lanka has the skilled medical workforce to start medical tourism big time. We also have the tourism attractions to capture the hearts of all medical tourists. In a country which is struggling with just raw material and labour export, medical tourism utilizing professional expertise might be the way forward. The need of the hour is a group of individuals willing to steer this concept to an ultimate success.

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