

Determining and Prioritizing Factors Affecting the Development of Medical Tourism with an Emphasis on Domestic Tourists (Case Study: City of Mashhad)

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Medical tourism as one of the aspects of tourism contributing to the sustainable development and economic mobility of the country has been regarded as an important branch of health tourism in several countries, either developed or developing, over the past few years. In this form of tourism, many patients would travel to well-known and credible medical centers in developed countries or capitals which hold healthcare facilities, in order to receive treatments. Iran, as one of the developing countries, has also been engaged in a number of such actions in this field, over the past few years. The city of Mashhad has been selected as the region of the study due to a set of specific features this area contains; the presence of Imam Reza's (AS) holy shrine in Mashhad is the main reason which attracts millions of fascinated pilgrims each year. On the other hand, the existence of well-equipped hospitals and medical centers in Mashhad has led to a considerable number of medical tourists seeking entry to the city. Moreover, train stations, intercity bus transportation system and the international airport are the additional means to which the accessibility of such tourists from all over Iran to medical centers located in Mashhad has been made easier.

The main purpose of the study is to evaluate the extent of importance regarding the effective factors in choosing a destination for medical tourism from the perspective of domestic tourists followed by investigating the role of aforementioned factors in development of medical tourism in Mashhad. Separating the effective criteria and factors on development of medical tourism in Mashhad, as well as comparing the views of experts and domestic medical tourists related to the prioritization of such factors, are among the additional goals of this study.

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2. Theoretical Framework

Medical tourism, as one of the branches in health tourism, has been developed through the past decade. In the beginning of the industry's development, only a handful of hospitals in four or five particular countries have been prominent as a medical tourism destination; yet nowadays, hundreds of hospitals and clinics in more than 30 countries welcome this group of tourists as a destination of medical tourism. Basically, medical tourism can be defined as travelling for the purpose of receiving treatments regarding physical illness or different surgical operations under supervision of doctors in hospitals and medical centers. These individuals seek affordable treatments with high quality as well as access to treatment methods which are more suitable and diverse than what already exists in their cities or countries. Considering the high-income nature of this industry along with the reinforcement of healthcare and treatment structures, many countries have shown interest towards the development of this branch in tourism. In a study conducted by the United Nations in 2008, a set of features such as providing advanced facilities, high-quality and the low cost of treatment have been found as the most significant factors which attract patients in the field of medical tourism.

3. Methodology

Data collection in this study has been carried out using the library-internet approach. Also, in terms of the objective and data collection, the present research is an applied and descriptive survey study, respectively. In order to prioritize the effective factors on development of medical tourism in Mashhad from the perspective of medical tourists, a Friedman test has been carried out; on the other hand, a process technique has been used to prioritize said factors from the experts' point of view. Furthermore, using Expert Choice (through AHP hierarchical analysis software) and calculating the passive statistical society formula, the extent of sample have been found to be 384, with 95% confidence level.

In this study, a simple randomized approach has been used to distribute questionnaires. To ensure the validity of questionnaire in the present study, a logical validity analysis have been carried out which has been investigated and accepted according to the experts' views. The reliability of questionnaire has also been evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha formula. The result of Cronbach's Alpha shows 0.821 which indicates the proper reliability of questionnaire.

4. Research Findings

From the domestic medical tourists' point of view, "advanced medical facilities and equipment", "the skill and expertise of medical staff", and

“religious beliefs and opinions” are the first three priorities respectively, stated by tourists as reasons for selecting Mashhad as the place for receiving their treatments. “The skill and expertise of medical staff” has been selected by the experts as the most important factor for choosing Mashhad as the medical tourism destination. Other factors such as “medical facilities and equipment” and “distance” have occupied the next categories, respectively.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

Given the importance of medical tourism in a national and international level, arranging a medical tourism strategic plan appears to be fairly useful in segregation of urban areas parallel to the country’s 20-year vision; moreover, considering this branch of tourism as the second priority after religious tourism can highly contribute to the development of medical tourism in Mashhad followed by a sustainable tourism development in the area.

Key words: AHP techniques, City of Mashhad, Domestic tourists, Friedman test, Medical tourism

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