

Analyzing Health Tourism Challenges in Mashhad From the Perspective of Foreign Patients

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Health tourism is a form of travel for the purpose of obtaining health and medical care in addition to entertainment, leisure and comfort. Medical developments and availability of state of the art medical equipment in Iran have created new opportunities for tourism industry and especially health tourism. Mashhad as the capital of the province and a main hub offering a variety of premium services, particularly in healthcare in the field of dialysis, dentistry, cardiac surgery, plastic surgery, and eye surgery, etc., is of a special position not only throughout the province of Khorasan Razavi but also at the national and international levels. These conditions along with well-founded mode of transportation (roads, railway, international airport, etc.), residences, entertainment, and tourism centers especially religious tourism have provided an appropriate situation to attract medical and health tourists. Therefore, it is necessary to the requirements and problems of clients in health tourism be recognized and considered in planning and management.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper is a descriptive-analytic study developed to evaluate the state of health tourism in Mashhad from the perspective of foreign tourists. In order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of health tourism development in Mashhad, this study investigates the administrative structure of health tourism and the regional opportunities and threats. The study population is tourists (patients) who arrived in Mashhad in 2013 (July to November) with the intention of receiving treatment. The sample of this study consists of foreign patients selected from the hospitals of Imam Reza, Bent al-Hoda, Javad al-Aeme, and Mehr. To gather data and

scrutinize foreign patients' satisfaction accurately, 23 variables were selected according to which the items of the questionnaire were designed.

3. Results & Discussion

The results showed that the greatest number of patients belonged to the countries of Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, Kuwait, and Bahrain. More than 72 percent of the respondents expressed that visiting the city and getting treatment were their goal of traveling to Mashhad. The cultural and religious affinity along with a sense of security and confidence in Muslim physicians in a religious atmosphere were among the most important factors in choosing Mashhad as a health tourism destination. The initial process and treatment of health problems of tourism in Iran, the state of information, lack of interpreters in different languages at medical centers, the process of obtaining visa and residence permits in Iran, urban transportation problems and access to hospitals and medical centers are the most important problems faced by health tourism. In general, respondents were highly satisfied with health status and access to high quality accommodations and foods. Average total cost of residence in Mashhad was estimated 28330000 Rials. 66.7% of respondents evaluated that the behaviors and attitudes of emergency department staff of the sample hospitals were good. 79.8% of respondents were highly satisfied with health services delivery and physicians' attitudes toward patients. More than 55% of respondents also evaluated well the nursing services. Decision making regarding the selection of hospitals was mainly through recommendations of friends and relatives. The total mean score of hospital services was 18 for Javad Al-Aeme, 15.75 for Imam Reza Hospital, 18.17 for Bent al-Hoda and 15 (from 20) for Mehr hospital.

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4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The main challenges that health tourists faced when visiting and staying in the city of Mashhad are:

- Weaknesses in marketing and information systems for the introduction of tourist destinations, facilities, and processes of reception and treatment in Mashhad
- Lack of support for foreign languages, and the lack of interpreters of different languages at medical centers
- Problems related to the process of obtaining visas, authorized period of stay and other arrival and residence permits
- Problems related to urban transportation and lack of easy access to hospitals
- Lack of electronic reception system for foreign patients
- Payment-related problems and a weak system of financial transactions at medical centers
- Lack of complete health tourism packages, including both medical and tourism services

Thus, considering the challenges in this industry in Mashhad, and institutional infrastructures caused by public-private partnership especially in recent years as well as the existence of scientific

and cultural potentials in this city, the modification of existing processes in order to improve the quality of health services delivery to health tourists seems possible through the following recommendations:

- 1) Specify and define the role and importance of Mashhad in health tourism industry of the country
- 2) Develop a health tourism master plan in Iran with the emphasis on designing an integrated marketing management system
- 3) Encourage medical centers in Mashhad to get international standards and licenses of health tourism in order to develop health tourism and promote health indicators throughout the city and the province
- 4) Develop an efficient collaboration between public and private practitioners and activists in this field.
- 5) Support the super ideas on health tourism development in the province of Khorasan Razavi, on the basis of regional human resources and environmental powers

Keywords: Foreign patients, Health tourism, Medical tourism, Mashhad.

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