Chapter 6
Role, Rules, and Regulations for Global Medical Tourism Facilitators

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ABSTRACT

Global medical travel has transformed medical travel/tourism facilitator’s role, making it more sophisticated and globally competitive with their presence on the internet, and providing medical tourism packages catering to patient-centered healthcare needs. The important role played by medical tourism facilitators cannot be ignored along with rules and regulations required to accredit these medical travel companies. They act as mediators between the potential patients and the private healthcare providers, physicians in the global medical tourism supply chain, along with airlines and hotel, thus, reducing a medical traveler’s worries regarding surgery abroad. Facilitators assist the potential medical tourists to plan and make healthcare decisions for travelling abroad, choosing and matching the patient with the specialty hospital for surgery, country and making all travel, accommodation and visa arrangements prior to travel, coordination between doctor and patient, personal nursing attendant, follow-up care and possibility of sightseeing, rest and recovery at the host-country of treatment. Thus, the chapter examines the reasons for the growth of global healthcare through medical travel/tourism in developing countries such as India, Thailand, Mexico, Poland and Malaysia and identifies the role, rules and regulations required for accredited medical tourism facilitators to connect patients with the healthcare providers in various countries to meet specific healthcare needs.

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BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION

Tourism is linked with travelling for leisure, pleasure, sightseeing, shopping and relaxation. On the other hand, travelling for medical purposes or medical tourism (MTm) is linked with illness, overseas hospital, diagnostic tests, complex surgery such as cancer, cardiac, cosmetic, organ transplant, knee/hip replacement, eye, dental or reproductive purposes. ‘Patients without borders,’ similar to ‘doctors, without borders’ is a reality. Patients’ as medical tourists (MTs) travel to seek affordable but better or comparable quality of healthcare in desperate and helpless situation, with a hope to cure and improve their health and quality of life. Increasingly, patients are travelling crossborder or across continents for wellness/alternative therapy or medical treatment/surgery. Patients are using services of medical travel agents (MTAs) also popularly known as Medical Tourism Facilitators (MTFs) to make healthcare related travel arrangements. They can be: (i) well known private hospitals like Apollo, Bumrungrad, Wockhardt, Raffles and Fortis, who make travel arrangements for patients through their online travel-desk; (ii) Medical travel agencies also known as MTFs, arrange packaged medical travel specific to meet international patient’s health and medical treatment requirements.

International medical travel has transformed the healthcare industry in an innovative way, similar to international education. Where patients as MTs have a choice of travelling to countries where the best quality of affordable surgery and medical expertise is available without any waiting time compared to their home country (Medhekar, Wong, & Hall, 2014). Increasing number of foreign patients from developed and developing countries are travelling to India, Thailand, Mexico, and Malaysia for affordable accredited quality of timely healthcare and positive healthcare outcomes (Lunt, Horsfall, & Hanefeld, 2016; Medhekar & Ali, 2012; Turner, 2007 & 2010).

These patients/MTs choose the hospital in a country for medical treatment. They either make their own travel arrangements directly, which is a complex decision-making process, by asking family and friends (word-of-mouth) who may have travelled abroad for treatment and search the internet (word of mouse) for information (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Medhekar & Newby, 2012). Alternatively, increasing number of foreign patients from the demand-side are using the services of medical travel agents/ facilitators who act as liaison or broker to connect the potential MTs with the supply-side super-speciality hospitals and specialists surgeon/physicians on their list, to meet their healthcare needs (Dalstrom, 2013; Wagle, 2013; Skountridaki, 2017). They, MTFs play a key role in disseminating information to the potential MTs regarding various hospital facilities, super-speciality, surgical options, surgery cost, accreditation, countries economic and political situation, travel medicine, and tourism opportunities.

The important role played by MTFs cannot be ignored, as they act as mediators or intermediaries between the potential patients and the private corporate healthcare providers and physicians in the global MTm supply chain. Facilitators assist the potential MTs to plan and make healthcare decision for travelling abroad, choosing and matching the patient with the super-speciality-hospital for surgery and making all travel, accommodation and visa arrangements prior to travel, coordinate between doctor and patient, transfer confidential medical records, make arrangements for personal nursing attendant, hotel and follow-up care. Thus reducing MTs worries regarding surgery abroad (Crooks, Turner, Snyder, Johnston, & Kingsbury, 2011; Dalstrom, 2013; Mohamad, Omar, & Haron, 2012). Travelling abroad for medical surgery and treatment is very complex phenomenon given the logistics, compared to being a normal tourist. Global medical travel for surgery has transformed MTFs role, made it more sophisticated.