Chapter 4

Strategic Indicators of the Role of Government in Developing Dubai as a Medical Tourism Hub

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ABSTRACT

Medical tourism is a growing phenomenon in the Middle East. Dubai is strategically located to competitively attract patients from Islamic backgrounds given the cultural congruence with the Middle Eastern countries for medical tourism. Dubai is famous for its shopping, sightseeing, desert safaris, state-of-the-art tourism facilities, and as a melting pot for Eastern and Western civilizations. The government of United Arab Emirates is playing a key role to support the development of Dubai as a medical tourism hub of the Middle East and diversify the oil-based economy in an innovative way. It is developing various niche tourism products and services embedded in the non-oil sectors of the economy by applying the five strategic indicators required to study the role of governments in planning and supporting sustainable tourism.

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INTRODUCTION

Dubai is famous for its luxury shopping, sightseeing, recreation facilities, state-of-the-art tourism facilities, financial capital of middle east, global property market, and an attractive medical travel destination. The main economy of United Arab Emirates (UAE) is production and export of oil, natural gas, services sector -shipping, finance, luxury real estate, shopping and tourism (Alhosani & Zaidan, 2014; Ballantyne, 2015; Sharpley, 2008; Zaidan, 2016). Tourism plays a key role in Dubai’s economy, with nearly 10 million people visiting Dubai every year in Emirates region. Nearly 10 million inbound tourists visit Dubai every year, with a domestic population of 9.4 million (MTI, 2019). In terms of geography, Dubai is strategically located to attract patients from Islamic backgrounds given the cultural familiarity with the Middle Eastern countries (Haq & Medhekar, 2015). Dubai is considered as “New York/Las Vegas/Miami rolled into one” (Bagaen, 2007, p. 173).

Dubai is already a popular tourist destination and known as the melting pot of eastern and western civilisations (Alhosani & Zaidan, 2014; Ballantyne, 2015; Henderson, 2014; Inhorn, 2016; Khan & Alam, 2014). It is also known as “A star in the East” (Balakrishnan, 2008). According to Alhosani and Zaidan (2014), the travel and tourism sector is projected to grow, annually at 4.1% and create 245,000 employment opportunities by 2023. Dubai is like Singapore, which is the hub of finance, tourism, luxury shopping, and an attractive medical tourism destination of the Middle East (Henderson, 2007).

Medical tourism is a growing phenomenon in the Middle East. The number of people from neighbouring countries and Europe, are travelling in-bound to Dubai in the UAE, for medical treatment, diagnostic tests and complex surgery. Medical travel/tourism is on the rise due to high quality of medical services, use of high-tech medical technology, and is emerging and considered as a medical tourism hub (Al-Harbi, 2018). People are travelling for second opinion for diagnostic tests and specialist surgeries such as cosmetic, infertility treatments, dental, orthopaedic and cardiac. Global patients as medical tourists are very well informed. They make an informed decision and travel crossborder or long distances between continents to developing countries such as Thailand, India, Malaysia, Turkey, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Egypt and Dubai, which are global healthcare destinations for medical treatment and complex surgeries (Bookman & Bookman, 2007; Connell, 2013; Deloitte, 2008; Horowitz & Rosensweig, 2007; Lunt & Mannion, 2014; Manaf et al., 2015; Medhekar & Ali, 2012; Omar et al., 2015; Sag & Zengul, 2018; Sandberg, 2017).

There are numerous economic opportunities and challenges to develop Dubai’s Healthcare City as a global medical tourism hub of the Middle East along with diversifying its non-oil sector of the economy (Mansfeld & Winckler, 2007; Medhekar & Haq, 2016; Oxford Business Group, 2017; Sag & Zengul, 2018). Given the
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