MEDICAL TOURISM FACILITATORS:

the Good,
the Bad,
-- the Unknown
Medical Tourism Facilitators: the Good, the Bad -- the Unknown

Medical tourism facilitators, those charged with navigating a patient through the process of securing and achieving quality and affordable treatments and procedures abroad, are entering the healthcare travel industry at alarming rates that, if not monitored through standards and best-practices, threaten to strangle the very lifeblood the profession provides.
Medical Tourism Facilitators: the Good, the Bad -- the Unknown

By Renée-Marie Stephano

The odds that a child wakes up one morning after dreaming of a career as a medical tourism facilitator might be far-fetched. The chances might be more reasonable that as the same child becomes an adult and begins to develop a wide range of professional attributes — from problem-solving and decision-making to team management and communication — entry into the medical tourism industry becomes a much more exciting, lucrative and rewarding a thought.

Consider the fact that medical tourism is a $100 billion industry, and growing. ¹ Now add to that by the year 2017, at least $228 billion in medical care is predicted to leave the United States for foreign markets.² That figure has been forecast to grow at 35 percent each year.³

Those numbers alone make medical tourism an attractive field to bite into. No wonder the industry is attracting hundreds to pursue careers in medical tourism each day. But, it might come as an even greater surprise that medical tourism facilitators can usually profit 20-40 percent of the total cost of a procedure. In some cases, a medical facilitator can earn more than a surgeon in some countries. That’s because procedures are less expensive due to market price differences, and patient savings are that much higher overseas — up to 75 percent — than those in the United States.⁴


Traveling patients, many of whom are college-educated with annual earnings from $50,000-$100,000\(^5\), don't seem to mind facilitators negotiating rewards on their behalf, and why should they. Using a medical tourism facilitator is more convenient and expedient than looking for a program on their own, especially for a patient tasting healthcare travel abroad for the first time. Plus, their medical expenses are dramatically reduced and, in the meantime, patients get to live at resort-like facilities fit with accommodations reserved for kings or queens and other VIP's.

**Profits, Life-Saving Incentives**

Now throw in the added bonus that medical tourism facilitators get to take satisfaction in knowing of their direct impact on the lives of millions who are in need of treatments and procedures they may otherwise not be able to afford or find where they live.

Added together, if saving lives and financial prosperity are paramount to career interests, then being properly equipped with the most up-to-date information, qualifications and expertise, intuition and prudence and, most importantly, trust and credibility is essential for motivated and proactive medical tourism facilitators worth their mettle today.

As medical tourism continues to evolve, industry facilitators have surfaced in many forms, from large multi-national corporations to small mom-and-pop players working out of a home office. Unfortunately, due to expanded access to the Internet and modern marketing techniques, these commercial profiles have become hardly distinguishable from each other and even less visible to consumers with even the keenest of eyes.

The differences do become a little clearer to patients based on the similarity of destination management functions that medical tourism facilitators all provide, like requesting and obtaining passports, booking flight and lodging accommodations, and transportation, recreational therapy and tours. But, if that were all that makes or breaks a sharp medical facilitator, there would be more service providers than those already seeking entry into the field.

**Success Comes with Price**

Although medical tourism can be a profitable endeavor for facilitators ready to jump head-first into the industry, sustainable success does not come without its own price. Facilitators must be able to identify reliable providers, understand complex arrangements and medical procedures, and make critical preparations that may make the difference in life or death.

---

\(^5\) Blackwell, A.A., Zhang, Huiyu, Chen, Shuai; “2013 MTA Medical Tourism Survey Report”; School of Business; The George Washington University; Medical Tourism
Ask any facilitator in the business long enough. They are likely to note that what separates the run-of-the-mill facilitator from one who is authoritative and thriving is how well they understand medical services and how well they can convey messages between patients and international hospitals and doctors.

**From Videos to Aftercare**

This consultation may begin with initial price quotes and the coordination of video conference calls between doctor and patient and include further liaisons that extend through and past bill procurement and aftercare.

In other words, facilitators are expected to hold the hand of their patients with a tight grip — if not more -- throughout the complete process. As the first-line of interaction for patients considering medical travel abroad, facilitators play a key role in either refraining or influencing consumers to move forward with tourism plans and, at the same time, carry the responsibility of promoting an entire industry.

**Fear not First**

At the beginning of any conversation with a facilitator, the idea of having a medical procedure overseas is still fraught with fear for many people. Patients may not have wanted to choose to travel abroad if not for their limited insurance coverage — about half lack health benefits to begin with6 — or time factors that necessitate immediate medical attention to, say, a hip or knee replacement at a price they can't afford to turn down.

Compound those natural uncertainties about travel with a procedure that is stressful under any circumstance and it's easy to see how a potential medical tourist can be taken out of their comfort zone and immediately stop pursuing what once sounded like a good idea.

On the other hand, a reputable facilitator with established connections to accredited hospitals — some 170 outside the United States -- and versed in the procedures and services they offer can be the soothing voice for the leeriest of travelers. 7 Obtaining the right price, appropriate rehabilitation, reliable medication sources and accessible follow-up care that is transparent for patients to see is the best sedation for worried consumers.

---


**Trouble Out of Travel**

Medical tourism facilitators need to take the trouble out of travel plans. Patients want to feel at home before they even cross the border. The ability to break down language and simplify cultural differences is critical for a medical tourism facilitator who needs to understand ethical and legal issues and serve, more importantly, as a trusted mediator among healthcare provider, travel consultancy and patient. When these contacts and relationships are properly secured and nourished, the back-and-forth transfer of information -- from medical records to dinner menus -- becomes convenient and well-served.

**Who's Minding the Store?**

Keeping all of these diverse functions in mind, it is only natural for the quality of service to vary from one facilitator to the next. Unfortunately, not unlike buying a used car, facilitators can be prone to promise everything under the sun to patients and healthcare providers, even on the most-darkest days. Even worse is that no one is monitoring their behavior based on established standards and accepted criteria.

Some of the disingenuous activities are perpetrated in bias toward particular hospitals or destinations and fuel the prevalence for fraudulent pricing and misleading services for vulnerable consumers. No one benefits -- not the industry itself, nor patients and well-intentioned facilitators, either.

At the end of the day, patients must feel secure that they have achieved the same outcomes and experiences that they envisioned when the first looked into the eyes of a facilitator at their initial consultation and were seasoned with transparent education related to international travel including, but not limited to medical procedures, accountability, culture, and legal and ethical issues.

The challenge then for facilitators becomes how to distinguish their operations not only from those poor and inadequate operations in the industry, but also from the very good ones. By doing so, a facilitator can build and sustain a medical tourism structure that can deliver solutions -- for both the expected and unexpected -- to patients and healthcare providers alike.

**Healthy Competition**

The time to become highly regarded is now. Facilitators need to take action sooner rather than later. Markets are emerging at destinations that were once afterthoughts and competition for the healthcare dollar is higher than ever.

Consumers are also garnering a wealth of knowledge about medical tourism through many of the same routes that are no longer privy to facilitators. Although medical tourism may still not be a household name in every neighborhood, there’s every reason to expect potential patients to be armed and ready to throw a slew of questions at facilitators who better be ready to catch and answer them as soon as they pick up the phone.
‘Good Housekeeping’
Facilitators should then have their own arsenal of patient testimonies; facts on accreditation; reports related to international hospitals; links to tourism boards and ministries, healthcare clusters and specialized clinics; and insight into cost-effective procedures and attractive destinations.

Improved infrastructure including communications, transportation, water and sewer, electricity and power generation have enabled many countries to build enviable healthcare centers for patients traveling from around the world. Facilitators constantly need to be abreast of these economic developments as hot spots for medical tourism emerge on all continents.

One of the more significant tools at a facilitator’s disposal is certification — or Joint Commission International accreditation, the word-wide “Good Housekeeping” seal of approval for medical practitioners and institutions. JCI-accreditation enables a facilitator to transfer confidence, trust and credibility to their patients, reduce the chance of errors and elevate the likelihood for positive outcomes.

Impact of ObamaCare
Even with the wherewithal of accreditation, medical tourism facilitators have their hands full. The impact of ObamaCare on patients in the United States remains guesswork. However, experts on both sides of the healthcare reform debate agree that costs are likely to rise and, with millions expected to enter an already overburdened system, wait times will exceed from what had previously been considered extensive for certain procedures.

Medical tourism is poised to meet these challenges and many others only if facilitators are cognizant of evolving increases and decreases in healthcare insurance benefits and able to seek out, vet and arrange for necessary documentation to avoid delays in treatment overseas without additional expenses.

Weakest Link
Medical tourism has exploded on the healthcare landscape. Patients are now moving freely from one country to the next in an effort to find the best care at the right price. However, despite the tremendous growth and potential, the strength of the chain that connects patients together with affordable and quality care is its weakest link. In many respects — even in light of the noble contributions of many — that link is the industry’s medical facilitators.

Most patients who took advantage of a facilitator — about 36 percent of all medical travelers do -- are satisfied with the overall service they received. In the same breath, medical knowledge, availability, and attention to detail in the facilitator experience left much to be desired. In other words, facilitators must be able to go the extra yard, one yard at a time. It also doesn’t help to know where that yard leads.

Unchartered Waters
As the pool of medical tourism patients rises, facilitators are more than eager to dive in and accommodate them. The rewards are too advantageous not to, no matter how unchartered those waters may be.

In the face of mounting criticism, safeguards and established criteria are desperately needed for those who wish to designate themselves as medical tourism facilitators. Certification and benchmarks should not be too much to ask on behalf of patients who have entrusted facilitators, in many instances, with their physical and financial well-being, or healthcare providers and facilities that have put their professional reputations at stake.

Facilitators then should find every reason to provide more proven solutions than questions left unanswered. However, only those willing to invest in the time to comprehend and understand ethical, cultural and legal issues – from destinations and insurance facilitation to the legal viability of a procedure and the seamless coordination of travel accommodations – are likely to thrive.

Industry Beacon
The medical tourism industry is where it is today, in good part, due to the ground-breaking decisions and efforts made on the backs of its third-party providers. But, trial-and-error -- at the risk of enormous consequence -- has been the best and, sadly, the only teacher. The good news is that there are now teachers that are available to preach based on experience in the form of medical tourism associations and supportive governing bodies world-wide.

Through continuing education by way of tailored certification programs and networking and partnership opportunities linked to professional conferences and summits, medical tourism facilitators can serve as a timely, trusted and worthy beacon for all stakeholders to follow -- healthcare providers and patients alike. Medical tourism facilitators – quite literally -- owe it to themselves to do so. The industry is counting on them to do so as well.
Renée-Marie Stephano, Esq.

President of the Medical Tourism Association®

Renée-Marie Stephano is president and co-founder of the Medical Tourism Association®, and editor-in-chief of Medical Tourism Magazine® and the Health and Wellness Destination Guide Series of books. She also serves the dual role of president of the Corporate Health and Wellness Association and co-editor of the Corporate Wellness Magazine.

Ms. Stephano has authored several books from “Developing International Patient Centers, Best Practices in Facilitation,” to “Medical Tourism for Insurers and Employers,” and the most recent, “Engaging Wellness”; and is the co-author of “Medical Tourism: An International Healthcare Guide for Insurers, Employers and Governments” and “Employers and Governments and Engaging Wellness — Corporate Wellness Programs that Work.” She is a keynote speaker at international conferences, has spoken at hundreds of events and has been featured and mentioned in many more media publications throughout the world.

An attorney, Ms. Stephano specializes in working with governments, hospitals, insurance companies and employers around the globe to develop sustainable medical programs and strategies including healthcare clusters and public-private partnerships to support medical tourism and patient initiatives and, at the same time, provide a benefit and return to the local community. To this end, she organizes one of the only Ministerial Summits that brings together ministers of health, wellness, tourism and economic development each year.

Ms. Stephano has worked diligently to assess the feasibility and opportunities of international programs for both hospitals worldwide and those in the United States including international expansion, clinical development and affiliations and partnerships with cities and countries. She also consults governments in the development of sustainable Medical Tourism Zones & Free Healthcare Zones.

Ms. Stephano serves on the Board of Directors for the International Healthcare Research Center, a 501c3, nonprofit health and wellness research center, and two Washington, D.C. - based groups focused on lobbying the U.S. Congress. She donates her time as president of both the Medical Travel Association® and Corporate Health and Wellness Association.
About the MTA

The Medical Tourism Association™ is a global non-profit association for the medical tourism and international patient industry. MTA works with healthcare providers, governments, insurance companies, employers, travel agents and other buyers of healthcare - in their medical tourism, international patient, and healthcare initiatives - with a focus on providing the highest quality transparent healthcare. MTA is also committed to raising consumer awareness of international healthcare options, and has specific initiatives designed to educate and increase the number of consumers who travel for healthcare. MTA is also committed to educating consumers about their options internationally for medical treatment. MTA educates consumers through its programs, such as its Health & Wellness Destination Guides and through the its #1 rated internet portal for healthcare consumers: www.MedicalTourism.com.

MTA Websites:
MedicalTourismAssociation.com
MedicalTourismMagazine.com
MedicalTourism.com
MedicalTourismCity.com

Contact:
Info@MedicalTourismAssociation.com
USA 001-561-791-2000