India and Medical Tourism

Published On: 08-05-2023

Why in News: India hosted the ‘One Earth One Health – Advantage Healthcare India – 2023’ programme in New Delhi on April 27 and 28, in a bid to promote India as a hub for medical tourism.

Medical Tourism

Medical tourism is also known as medical value travel, health tourism or global healthcare which is the practice of travelling across international borders seeking medical services, mainly elective or complex surgeries.

Stakeholders in medical tourism include airlines, hospitals, wellness centres and hotels, among others.Currently, the most sought-after destination for such procedures is Canada with its favourable environment, its robust medical tourism industry and its top-quality facilities and services.

While universal healthcare is available to its citizens, most government hospitals in Canada also cater to foreign patients.

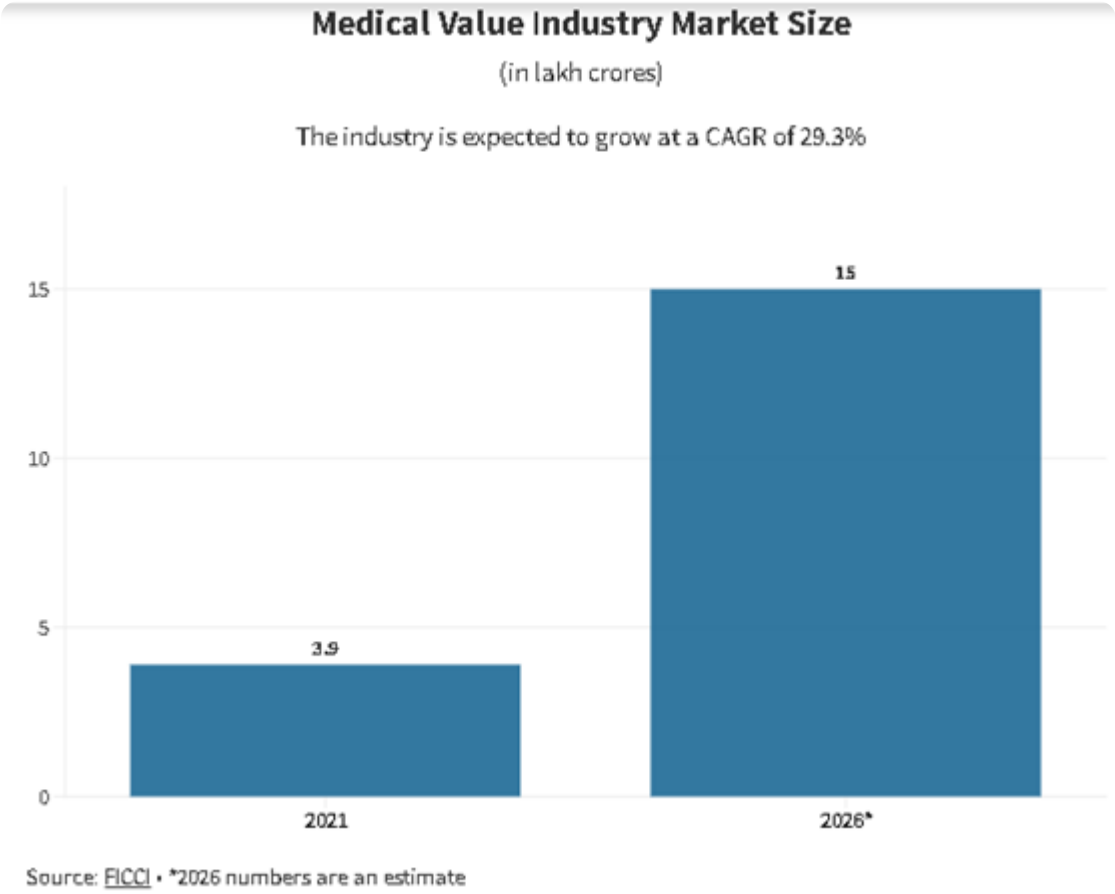
India: A Preferred medical destination

India is a preferred location for medical tourists due to its cost-effective healthcare services, quality diagnostic equipment and trained doctors, with many of them fluent in English.

Per the Ministry of Tourism website, India has 1000 recognized nurses-training centres with 10,000 nurses graduating annually.

India also has ayurveda, yoga & naturopathy and other traditional systems of medicine for the treatment of various ailments, promoting wellness tourism.

India & its medical tourism industry



Medical tourism in India has been on the rise in the past decade – with most patients hailing from Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

From 2015-2018, the number of foreign medical tourists steadily increased from 2.34 lakhs to 4.95 lakhs.

Apart from India's neighbours, tourists from Iraq, Oman, Maldives, Yemen, Uzbekistan and Sudan chose India for medical services due to advanced facilities, skilled doctors and low cost of treatment.

India earned an estimated ?1,35,193 crore, ?1,54,146 crore, and ?1,77,874 crore in foreign exchange in 2015, 2016 and 2017 respectively from MVT. Niti Aayog pegged India's MVT at $3 billion in 2015 and estimated it to grow at 15%.

Moreover, it was estimated to rise to $9 billion by 2020, accounting for 20% of the global market share.

However, as the world shut down in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, MVT dropped as well, with the number of foreign arrivals in India dropping to 1.83 lakhs. As India imposed a strict lockdown to arrest the spread of the virus, MVT earnings dropped, failing to breach the predicted $9 billion mark.

The industry rebounded in 2021 as restrictions eased and war broke out between Russia and Ukraine, leading to a rise in the cost of treatment in the West. This pushed medical tourists to Asia and India in particular.

The Centre rolled out the 'National Strategy and Roadmap for Medical and Wellness Tourism' in January 2022 to provide health services to the world at large

Currently, India, ranked tenth with a score of 69.80 on the Medical Tourism Index, offers over 200 types of medical services ranging from fertility treatments to skincare. The most sought-after treatments are cancer treatment and organ transplant surgeries, as these are 65-90% cheaper rates when compared to US, Europe, Australia or even Singapore.

India has 40 healthcare facilities accredited to the Joint Commission International (JCI) and 1400 National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers (NABH)-accredited hospitals. It also accounts for 6% of the global MVT market.

NITI Aayog estimates that the Indian economy could earn an additional $9 billion by 2026 from MVT and wellness tourism. Globally, the MVT market is projected to grow from $13.98 billion in 2021 to $53.51 billion in 2028 at a CAGR of 21.1%.

Government's plans to promote MVT

The Centre has launched a 'Heal in India' campaign to market the nation as a wellness and medical tourism destination. Targetting the global demand for holistic healing for lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, the government is pitching Ayurveda, yoga and naturopathy — falling under the ambit of the Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH) ministry — as an alternative to modern medicine. India has launched e-visas for MVT travellers from 156 nations and has also accredited AYUSH centres, formalising their status in the Indian medical industry.

Under 'Heal in India', thirty-seven hospitals including thirty private hospitals across 17 cities have been identified to cater to MVT. Moreover, Centre has widened its health assurance scheme 'PM Jan Aarogya Yojana', covering approximately 500 million people and established 150,000 health & wellness centres.

The Centre also plans to launch a one-stop online MVT portal, which will include mapping of all medical facilitators including government and private hospitals, booking of services, payments and post-operative services. For better visibility, the MVT portal will be integrated with India's tourism website— Incredible India.

Hurdles for the MVT sector

India’s MVT sector lacks government regulations and monitoring. While both the Ministry of Health and Tourism are involved in the promotion of MVT, a separate body is needed to head MVT and coordinate between various stakeholders.

The prices for medical treatments differ as per the healthcare facility, leading to confusion as to the actual price for a particular procedure. The lack of a price range also leaves tourists susceptible to cheating. India also does not provide medical insurance portability that is, allowing coverage of medical treatments under the tourists’ existing insurance plans.

India’s national medical accreditation — NABH— is not known globally. Most foreign countries prefer the US-based JCI accreditation to the NABH, limiting options for MVT facilitators in India.