

Medical tourism in Thailand : a study of destination choice

Author:	Wongkit, Methawee
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The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Although medical tourism in Thailand has been discussed in the literature for several years, the scope of the research has been rather limited. Previous studies have tended to focus on the cost and types of medical treatments compared with other countries, the benefits of medical tourism, and ethical issues in the medical profession, whereas only a few studies have discussed the decision-making process of medical tourists when selecting a destination to receive treatment. Hence, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the travel drivers of medical tourists when evaluating destination choices for their treatments. Specifically, it aimed to determine whether destination features or medical treatments are the most important factor when deciding to travel to a particular destination to obtain medical procedures. The study also aimed to discover why medical tourists select Thailand as a medical tourism destination rather than other destinations, and why the respondents selected either Bangkok or Phuket as their preferred local medical tourism destination. As this was intended as an exploratory study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed. Qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with two industrial experts before formulating the survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire was then developed as the main research instrument to collect quantitative data from medical tourists. Three sampling methods - purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and quota sampling - were employed. A total of 345 people participated in the survey, with 188 (54.5%) respondents surveyed in Bangkok and 157 (45.5%) in Phuket.

The significant finding of this study is that medical treatment factors are more important than destination features when medical tourists assess their medical destination choices. In choosing Thailand as a destination, the majority of respondents were influenced by destination drivers and only a minority were solely motivated by treatment factors when they made the decision to receive treatments. Moreover, a large number of respondents made a spontaneous decision to receive medical care once they arrived in Thailand. This result contradicts the findings of previous studies, many of which have found that medical tourists evaluate and plan where they should travel for their

required medical treatment before commencing their trip. In addition, this study discovered that different types of medical treatment not only have a significant effect on types of medical tourists, but they also influence the local destination choice. Overall, the findings provide strong evidence that the decision-making processes of medical tourists are more complicated than tourism scholars have realized, and the previous assumption that medical tourists represent a homogenous market and are motivated to travel for medical reasons may not be applicable. In fact, medical tourists are like other special interest tourists in that they fall along a continuum, from those for whom it is the main trip purpose to those who identify it as a secondary or complementary trip purpose. Furthermore, 'deep' medical tourists may represent only about 20% of the medical tourism market in Thailand, whereas having a holiday is more important for the remaining 80%. Consequently, Thailand is still far more recognized as a holiday destination than a country for seeking medical treatment. The recommendation of this study is that an emphasis on improving attributes related to medical services may not stimulate the growth rate of medical tourism in Thailand. Rather, if the country attempted to upgrade its tourism products and services while continuing to improve its medical service quality standards, it would help to maintain its reputation as a renowned destination for both holidaymakers and medical tourists and stimulate the growth of the medical tourism industry. This would also help to sustain Thailand's competitive advantage over its main competitors and other emerging medical destinations.