MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND:
QUALIFIED HEALTHCARE OR JUST ANOTHER BUSINESS
STRATEGY AND MARKETING

Anna Davtyan
Ojal Rayamajhi
Tenzin Sonam Lama
Abhilasha Shrestha
Han No No Soe

Rangsit University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

This research paper examines the growing popularity of the medical tourism industry in Thailand, analyzing whether it is an affordable, world-class healthcare system or just another business strategy to attract tourists. This study, by focusing on various areas of Thai
healthcare, including their cost structure, quality, overall professionalism, infrastructure, sheds light on the findings collected from primary and secondary sources about healthcare services in Thailand. This study has used a mixed method of data analysis with a combination of qualitative information obtained from healthcare professionals with quantitative data collected through surveying domestic and foreign tourists who have already used the healthcare services in Thailand.

The results show that medical tourism in Thailand is not just affordable, but also meets international accreditation standards and has been able to establish a reputation in specific medical areas with complexities for example Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). The research also reveals the challenges faced by medical tourists due to language barriers, causing major concerns and serious misconceptions.

While Thailand has established itself as a prominent medical tourism destination for individuals seeking medical treatment from nearby countries as well as patients from other distant continents. The research recognizes the need for collaboration between healthcare providers, policymakers, and the tourism sector to improve the overall medical tourism experience, finding better marketing strategies and working on existing issues, which can improve the sector and create a better experience.

**Keywords:** medical tourism; business; marketing strategy; Thailand

**Introduction**

“Medical tourism” refers to the phenomenon of travelers who travel abroad for medical care, often to less developed countries (Reed, 2008). The vast majority of medical tourists come from developed countries, namely Europe, the United Kingdom, the Middle East, Japan, the United States, and Canada, where medical care is expensive and there are frequently extensive waiting lists. This phenomenon can be attributed to several key factors that have contributed to the increased attractiveness and growth of medical tourism as follows: inexpensive medical care costs in undeveloped countries, availability of international air travel, favorable exchange rates, the introduction of advanced technologies and provision of specialized medical services.

Thailand has also become a very popular destination for people seeking affordable healthcare in Asia. Thailand has proven itself as a prominent medical tourism destination. The country provides a winning combination of high-quality medical care, modern facilities, internationally trained medical staff, and low treatment prices, all set against an amazing landscape and a rich heritage of culture. They use a product bundling strategy where different grouped services are accumulated to serve people with different expectations and budget (Ebrahim & Ganguli, 2019).

Thailand right now has multiple competitive advantages, which may include, for example, the fact that it is one of the most popular tourist destinations, as well as one of the first countries to enter the medical tourism industry. Thailand is also well known for its Thai hospitality, which is known for their impeccable services at a reasonable price (Rerkrujipimol & Assenov, 2008). In Thailand, there is a concept where patients are treated as ‘kings’. From the moment a patient enters the hospital they get a feeling of being at a hotel or a resort. Their advertising and marketing present it as an attractive destination for medical tourism (Rosnan et al., 2019).
MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND:

The Ministry of Public Health of Thailand regulates and provides guidelines for Thai hospitals to maintain their quality. Some Thai hospitals also meet the standards approved by the Joint Commission International or JCI and also other international standards like ISO and the Hazards and Critical Control Points Principle (HACCP).

Thailand has seen a 16% annual increase in the influx of overseas patients requiring a wide range of medical procedures, from elective surgeries to complex medical treatments. Although the medical tourism industry in Thailand is expanding rapidly, it is critical to determine whether this is due to a well-developed healthcare system or simply other strategic business creativity (Glinos, 2006).

Underlying this growing business is an intricate network of elements such as government regulations, commercial interests, and healthcare infrastructure, all of which contribute to Thailand’s standing as a global healthcare destination.

Healthcare is one of the fastest growing industries and is a multi-billion dollar industry. However, countries such as India, Malaysia or Thailand have raised concerns about certain risks and ethical issues. Exposure to diseases that the tourists do not naturally have built up immunity for could be hazardous for patients. The world is undoubtedly becoming a global village, however medical tourism seems to have its benefits and unforeseen side effects, raising questions about the quality and consistency of their healthcare system (Puri, 2010).

Medical tourism in Thailand is a complex intersection of a developed healthcare industry and lucrative business strategy; however, it still raises concerns among recipients about the impact it has on local and global patients. There are also many issues associated with the language barriers the patients tend to face while seeking these treatments in a foreign country where the native language is not English.

Literature review

Medical Tourism

Many studies have been conducted in the field of medical tourism and its development in Thailand. Since (2013) conducted research, the main purpose of which was to analyze the business strategy of the medical tourism business in Thailand, with regards to the global market. The study aims to understand the factors that may have contributed to the success of medical tourism in Thailand including their demand, supply and service quality strategies.

The relationship between the public management and the quality of hospital services is also examined. This study uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the data collected from foreigners undergoing treatment in private hospitals in Bangkok. The limitation of this research is that it does not examine errors that may have occurred during data collection, such as self-report or selection errors.

This research examined market situations and potential demand and supply of the foreigners’ behavior. It also identifies the most important factor that influences foreigners’ perception of the Thai health facilities. The findings also suggest that the hospitals should pay more attention to specialists, technological equipment, hospital standardization and service quality to be able to compete in the global market.

The paper also identifies that the problems that Thailand faces while developing needed services to full capacity are a lack of human resources, problems in public relations and cooperation, lack of advanced planning, communication issues and scattered development all of which could hamper the quality of the country’s health care system.
The practical implications of the study may help policymakers and healthcare providers to offer the highest quality service. Further research can be conducted to focus more on service quality strategies and refine these strategies to achieve better results in the medical tourism industry. This research identifies the obstacles and challenges faced by this industry in Thailand, but future studies can help develop strategies to address these problems.

According to Suthin et al. (2007), the reasons for medical tourism gaining popularity in the above countries are as follows:

1. The long waiting lists in the developed countries.
2. The low cost of medical treatments in medical tourism destinations.
3. The latest healthcare technology have been adopted by the new service providers.
4. Affordable international air fares.
5. The advance of the Internet and the emergence of new companies and agents to serve as middlemen between international patients and hospital networks which help patients to easily access price and any other information (Rerkrujipimol & Assenov, 2011).

Furthermore, we can examine the study conducted by Srimuk & Choibamroong (2014) where they aim to develop strategic plans to promote high-quality physical and mental health tourism clusters in the BRIC countries through the Active Beach group of Thailand. Their strategic plan involves developing the quality of tourism establishments and services through standards and certifications. The limitation of this study is that it does not address the quality control issues faced by these areas in the healthcare sector.

Their strategic planning includes targeting high-quality tourism from the BRIC countries, for which the Tourism Authority of Thailand has already shifted their goals towards high-quality tourism and niche market tourism, aimed at attracting the middle- and high-income tourists.

This paper also highlights the importance of sustainability and stakeholder involvement. Further research on this topic should involve formulating strategic plans to improve the Thai health tourism sector in a sustainable manner so that it is a long-term mission. They can also have strategies to collaborate with the BRIC countries to have better results.

According to the study conducted by Cohen (2014), significant sociological issues are associated with the expanding scope of the Thai medical tourism industry, such as the quality of Thai medicine, the expansion of foreign-oriented healthcare, the growing number of "hotel-spitals" that provide both high-class healthcare and hospitality services, the relationship between foreigner-oriented medical facilities and the tourism industry, and the sector's effects on the Thai healthcare system.

This study uses a quantitative approach because most of the questionnaire, which was a survey-based data collection containing 29 questions, was closed-ended. The study surveyed two groups of people: foreigners living in Thailand and foreigners permanently residing in Russia. The limitation of this article is that the long-term viability and impact of medical tourism on the Thai healthcare system and local population are not discussed. Future studies should examine the potential moral and societal repercussions of medical tourism.

The study primarily focuses on Thailand as one of many countries where medical tourism is expanding quickly. The study also discusses the potential growth areas for the growth of Thai medical tourism industry.
MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND:

In 2005, The Group’s hospitals received approximately 10,000 foreign outpatients per day. The following year, 2006, the number of foreign outpatients was predicted to increase by approximately 30%.

Additionally, two aspects that have contributed to the growth and development of medical tourism in Thailand are the availability of medical services in the country. A growing number of medical tourists are attracted to Thailand due to efforts to promote its healthcare services to travelers as well as the country's high standard and competitively priced medical services.

Zhong et al. (2021) research paper provides a review of the literature published on medical, health and wellness tourism over a period of half a decade, which has the potential to help sector stakeholders and government understand the key areas of focus in this area. This paper includes a qualitative assessment and categorization of the articles into key research areas, as well as a discussion of trends, predictions, and future research agendas. The limitation is that it does not provide specific details or examples, as it is difficult to assess the quality and relevance of the review.

Three key areas of research were identified after analyzing 802 articles from large databases: market supply and demand, destination development and promotion, and development environment’s policy and impacts. The study predicts that medical, health and wellness travel will merge with other healthcare industries and be more deeply ingrained in sustainable development policies.

The merging of medical, health and wellness travel with other healthcare sectors and its potential impact on quality of life efforts, as well as sustainable development initiatives, underscore the necessity of cooperation and coordination between healthcare professionals, travel agencies, and politicians. This may influence the methods and decision-making processes used to promote and grow medical, health, and wellness tourism. The authors also discuss the future research agenda for medical, health, and wellness tourism.

The study focuses on how the country's healthcare providers and tourist organizations are evolving in the country to meet the growing demand for medical, health, and wellness tourism. An increasing demand for medical, health and wellness tourism has been identified, highlighting the need for the country's healthcare providers and tourism organizations to adapt and provide a wider range of services and experiences to meet this need. This could lead to the creation of specialized facilities, educational initiatives and promotional plans to attract travelers for medical reasons and improve the overall travel experience.

As a result of globalization, the level and quality of medical services have grown comparable across numerous countries, which has made price a determining factor in the competitiveness of the medical care market.

Patients are increasingly migrating from developed countries with advanced healthcare systems to other developing countries with affordable healthcare. Thailand has the opportunity to attract medical visitors and expand its domestic tourism goods due to its benefits in the medical industry. The study uses a qualitative approach because despite depending on numerical data or statistical analysis, it discusses the lack of specific details, thorough estimations, possible impacts, and extensive evaluations. Instead, it depends on descriptive and explanatory qualitative observations. The limitations of the study are that it does not discuss data on long-term effects.

A study was conducted by (Ushakov et al., 2019) that covered the strategy for promoting Thai medical services in international markets and the growth of medical tourism.
The research aims to determine how medical facilities help distinguish Thai national tourism products, create unique medical tours for Russian residents, assess the demand for Thai medical tours in Russia, and create a plan for marketing Thai clinics abroad. The study gathered information by having high-category hotels, visitor information centers, medical tourism fairs, and international congresses on healthcare and medical tourism complete questionnaires in Thai, Russian, and English.

A total of 6.2 million Russian-speaking Internet users in the Russian Federation who are actively interested in the medical tourism industry was high. The study contends that modern medical services and technology-focused advertising messages are more effective than more conventional ones that focus on comfort and care. The questionnaire that was used in the study consisted of 29 questions, which included personal data, trip details, and future plans information.

The authors further examine the use of advertising, instant messaging, and the demand for specialized marketing approaches to build marketing strategies for Thai medical services. They advocate the use of texts that highlight the achievements, resources, and credentials of Thai hospitals to promote the idea of advanced and high-quality care.

**Marketing strategies in the field of medical tourism**

The research study by Rerkrujipimo & Assenov (2011) evaluates the marketing strategies of healthcare providers through interviews and stakeholder observation, and proposes effective marketing strategies to maintain and improve Thailand's position as a leading medical tourism destination. This article identifies the strength of medical services in Thailand and how marketing strategies for medical tourism can be improved. This article also identifies issues that may reduce the growth of medical tourism in Thailand.

Alsarayreh (2017) recognizing the importance of medical tourism and recognizing the role of medical tourism in marketing Jordan overseas as a medical tourism destination. This study belongs to exploratory analytical studies that uses data collection and analysis to achieve results. In its marketing, information related to medical tourism, promotion through modern technology does not help improve medical tourism.

The study by Hanugerah (2018) aims to clarify the strategy of the development of medical tourism using the case study in South Korea. From the results of the study, it can be concluded that there are 5 factors in the development of medical tourism that have been implemented by South Korea with greater use of all the potential and strength that South Korea has (Dewi & Ayuningtyas, 2019).

Fox (2001) believes that tourism is as important as an economic activity for many countries in the globalized world. Like many countries, Taiwan is committed to tourism development, and its government has implemented several tourism strategies over the past decade. Fo the successful development of the industry, tourism marketing has been emphasized in various disciplines, in which design is one of the key elements. Globalization has compressed the world as a whole, and information technology plays an important role in connecting global networks (Saleh et al., 2015).

The most common mode for spreading information regarding medical tourism, marketing the field is word of mouth (WOM) mode. It is known that businesses with a high level of trust are known to establish themselves by building a reputation.

Xu (2007) argued that individuals engaging in this form of communication can have a direct impact on the organization, and four types of WOM publicity have been proposed;
MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND:

consumer to consumer, which refers to communication amongst close circle, business to consumer, where employers encourage employees to talk about the company’s products or services, business to business, and facilitated business to business, which produces information sharing in industrial purchase (Yeoh et al., 2013).

That is why feedback and recommendations should be well communicated in the medical tourism industry, both to spread awareness and to make necessary changes.

Leonova & Mawlood (2023) emphasizing the role of marketing in medical tourism.

The marketing plan for a medical tourism clinic should focus on promoting the clinic's services and facilities to foreign patients. The plan will include a market analysis and a competition analysis.

The clinic should demonstrate its unique advantages, such as the qualifications of the medical staff and the cost-effectiveness of the services. Tactics may include online marketing, trade shows, and partnerships with travel agencies. A well-executed marketing plan can result in 20-40% increase in international patient volume.

The goal is to increase awareness and interest in the clinic, which will ultimately encourage more international patients to seek medical care.

The marketing plan is important for medical tourism in various ways:
- setting clear goals and objectives;
- identifying your target market;
- utilizing the right marketing channels.

Research methodology

This study consists of a mixed method approach that uses both qualitative and quantitative research to assess the quality of healthcare in Thailand, as well as business and marketing aspects.

The qualitative data was collected using a well-designed questionnaire; interviews with doctors who have experience in the field of medical tourism.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions, allowing participants to give their personal opinions and experiences. Content analysis has been used to identify key trends and themes from the interviews in order to receive insight into the perceived quality of healthcare in Thailand.

The quantitative data was gathered through structured, designed survey questionnaires that were sent to 300 participants/respondents from different countries.

Our survey has multiple closed-end questions, designed to capture the respondent’s experiences in quantitative terms. The survey focused on a number of important key groups, including Rangsit University students, both domestic and foreign, and other tourists and people who came to Thailand for various reasons.

To ensure a diverse sample for the quantitative analysis, the survey was shared via multiple social media platforms.

This paper follows ethical guidelines, informed consent, and personal data privacy rules.
Results and discussion

Overall, 300 questionnaire responses were collected through various platforms from people who have been to Thailand for various reasons. We were able to reach people from 20 different countries, with most of the responses coming from Myanmar and Nepal.

Among the responses we found that 181 people had used the medical services in Thailand (see Fig. 1).

![Figure 1](image1.png)

Figure 1 – Number of respondents that used/experienced Thailand’s healthcare
(Source: made by co-authors)

To understand what procedures were more popular among domestic and international tourists seeking medical services here, we found that cardiac procedures were mostly used, followed by dental procedures and fertility treatments, orthopedic procedures and plastic surgery services (see Fig. 2).

![Figure 2](image2.png)

Figure 2 – The most common medical services used by the respondents
(Source: made by co-authors)

To further understand the reason why people use services here, we asked respondents what motivated them to use these services here (see Fig. 3).
MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND:

A huge percentage of people responded that the reason they use medical service in Thailand is the quality of healthcare which aligns with the first hypothesis we made.

The driving factor in the decision-making process for medical tourism from countries like Myanmar, Nepal, China, Philippines, Cambodia, Bhutan, India, Henan, Korea and Thailand is the reputation of Thailand for having good quality healthcare. Apart from quality, the recommendations from others also have a significant influence on the respondent's decision, which also signifies that word-of-mouth and previous experience with Thai healthcare have a positive impact on the decision making process of the people using these services. 21.5% of the participants also find the healthcare here more cost-effective than in their own country.

Figure 3- What motivates the respondent to use the healthcare services.
(Source: made by co-authors)

Figure 4- Willingness to recommend medical tourism in Thailand friends and family
(Source: made by co-authors)
This finding can also indicate that some people find it financially advantageous to seek medical care in Thailand instead of their own country.

The questionnaire also asked if based on their experience they would suggest the Thai healthcare to others, and 82.9% responded that they would, which also suggests that they find Thai medical care to be up to the standards (see Fig. 4).

Our findings show that out of 181 tourists 91 of them, which is more than half of the people who have used the service in Thailand, found that the language barrier was the biggest problem they faced while they were receiving their treatment (see Fig. 5).

![Figure 5](source: made by co-authors)

One respondent suggested: “Hospitals are of the highest standards and create a feeling of luxury. Compared to other medical facilities in first world countries it is relatively affordable as well. The language barrier makes it difficult to communicate with the doctors no matter how well-educated they are, but what is more difficult is to speak to the lower staff as English is not their very strong point.

Otherwise everything is fine. The hospitals are of the highest standard and give a luxurious feel. Compared to other medical facilities in first world countries, it is relatively affordable as well”, which suggests that language barrier, becomes a big barrier in the process of receiving the service. Some people also suggested that the medical care system should focus on the overall development of the zones with hospitals including the availability of hotels and other services in the areas near to the hospital, “It is mandatory for a certain percentage of employees to know Basic English in every department. To make the experience more convenient for international patients in terms of communication and understanding of their medical problems,” said another respondent who believes that the language barrier is the reason for the decline in satisfaction in the healthcare sector.

In addition to that some tourists from developing and underdeveloped countries find the services to be expensive, “The cost seems too high for the citizens from developing countries like Nepal”.

However, one respondent has justified the higher costs with the comparison of the quality, “The equipment and rooms for patients were okay but the price and quality really depended on the hospitals and the price of the room. However, some hospitals were significantly better than hospitals in my country. In my experience, the quality of expensive hospitals definitely deserves a higher price for sure.”
MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND:

Some people also believe that Thailand has a good potential for medical tourism based on their quality, “Thailand is growing as a medical tourism hub. People like us from Nepal come to Thailand if we have any issues relating to health”.

Interviews

In total, we managed to collect answers from 6 doctors of different medical specialties. Evaluating doctors’ responses provides valuable information about medical tourism in Thailand. It shows that they have a positive perspective of Thailand's healthcare system and that it contributes to both the country's economy and their high-quality medical care.

Dr. Parash Rayamajhi, a neurology, highlights Thailand's experience as well as its advanced healthcare systems. The reason for this is the high quality of care, as both doctors acknowledged the possibility of increased costs.

Nepalese dermatologist Dr. Shristi Sha, a dermatologist, suggests that dermatology services in Thailand are well advanced and more affordable than in many Western countries. She says that in recent years people have been going to Thailand for skin treatments and hair implants.

According to Dr. Ajit Rayamajhi, a Professor of pediatrics &Chief Consultant Pediatrician, Thailand's international recognition is due to its reputation for providing excellent healthcare, but he said there is a need to strike a balance between cost of care and quality.

Furthermore, Dr. Adhar Oli, an orthopedic surgeon, USA, promotes Thailand's image as the best destination for high-quality, affordable healthcare. He mentions that Thailand is famous for its oncology and chemoradiotherapy treatments. People from Western countries have started to prefer Thailand for cancer related treatments as it has established itself as a favorable medical destination for patients requiring comprehensive treatment.

Moreover, Dr. Sheela Poudel, an internal medicine specialist, USA, noted that Thailand has become one of the top destinations for patients seeking Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). They have advanced in phalloplasty techniques and have mastered the complex surgery process. She says the procedure would cost a patient only about one third of the price they would have to pay in the States making Thailand a more affordable yet advanced medical hub for SRS.

On the other hand, Dr. Ashraya Kadariya, a pediatrician and newborn specialist, highlights the growing popularity of medical tourism in Thailand suggesting that the quality is equivalent to other developed countries. He further goes on to say that from Nepal, patients find it a little more convenient to travel to India for various medical reasons due to the lack of linguistic and traveling barriers and world standard healthcare. He recommends that if Thailand focuses on multiple specialties and streamlines visa processes, it has the potential to become one of the most preferred countries for Nepalese patients wishing to travel for affordable yet high-quality healthcare.

In conclusion, we can see that developing countries in Asia like Nepal prefer Thailand as a good destination for advanced medical treatments and world-class facilities, however it is still a little expensive than traveling to India for medical care as the traveling process is cheaper and easier, since no visa is required and the ticket price is relatively low.
Based on the doctors' suggestions, it seems that Thailand specializes in some areas and if they can simplify the visa procedure and promotes medical tourism well, and then it can become a favorable medical destination for Nepalese patients.

Physicians from the United States have focused on the world-class SRS procedure and oncology specialization as a driving factor for patients to choose Thailand as a destination for treatment. They pointed to the economic benefits of seeking such treatment in Thailand.

**Conclusion**

Medical tourism is rapidly expanding, providing people with the opportunity to seek high-quality medical care at reasonable prices abroad. Thailand is recognized as a top medical tourism destination due to its advanced medical services, highly trained medical professionals and compelling tourism offerings. While the healthcare industry has undoubtedly helped Thailand's economy grow and improve the quality of care for both domestic and foreign patients, challenges such as communication barriers still exist.

The Thai government has developed competitiveness strategies to make Thailand the "Medical Center of Asia", including the Thailand 4.0 strategy, which is implemented for 10 years, starting from 2017 to 2026. Their strategy includes development of healthcare infrastructure, hotel business and digitization of the process. However, there is still a lack of clear integration between the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and the Thai Ministry of Health (MOH). There also appears to be a lack of collaboration between stakeholders (Pattarachat & Gozzoli, 2022).

Therefore, as Thailand is able to establish it as a prominent player in the medical tourism sector in Asia, they still need to address many challenges that may have negative effects in the long run of their development process. To sustain as a top destination for medical tourism, policy makers along with public and private sectors should collaborate in creating a satisfying healthcare procedure for the medical tourists.

Removing language barriers and creating a more digitally connected supply chain system should be the top priority for the country’s medical tourism sector. Travel agencies might play a vital role in connecting healthcare seekers to the services like transportation, accommodation, hospitals etc. therefore they should be encouraged to craft packages targeted for low income countries to meet their budgets (Heung et al., 2010).

Apart from improvements, building the right marketing strategies will help raise awareness and naturally attract a new stream of people who will be aware of medical tourism in Thailand and want to experience it.

**References:**


MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND:


Reed, M.D. (2008). Searches of the literature or Internet using the term “medical tourism” produce two sets of articles: travel for the purpose of delivering health care or travel for the purpose of seeking health care. The first usage primarily appears in the medical liter. Medical tourism. Medical Clinics of North America.


Suthin, K., Assenov, I. & Tirasatayapitak, A. (2007). Medical tourism: can supply keep up with the demand. Asia Pacific Tourism Association Joint Conference, Beijing, China.


Paper submitted 11 March 2024
Paper accepted for publishing 18 April 2024
Paper revised 29 April 2024
Paper published online 30 May 2024