Health tourism courses in Iran and the country’s potential in becoming the health tourism education hub in the Middle East region

Mohammadreza Maleki¹, Niusha Shahidi Sadeghi*¹, Saeed Hashemzadeh², Jalil Koohpayehzadeh³, Alireza Askari⁴

Received: 12 Nov 2019 Published: 2 Sep 2020

Conflicts of Interest: None declared
Funding: None

*This work has been published under CC BY-NC-SA 1.0 license.

Corresponding author: Niusha Shahidi Sadeghi, shahidi.n@iums.ac.ir

Dear Editor,

During recent years, economic attractiveness, the pristine health tourism (HT) market in Iran, Iran’s medical reputation among neighboring countries, and Policymakers’ determination to develop it were the motivating factors for the entrance of many individuals and institutions to this industry (1, 2). Thus, the HT market in addition to the numerous challenges such as the appearance of amalgam actors and lack of a defined mechanism, suddenly faced with the more important challenge of the widespread presence of less acquainted individuals in this field. On the other hand, Iran’s small share of the number of health tourists and its concentration in a few cities indicate that this field is underdeveloped (3).

In this regard, lack of trained personnel can be mentioned as one of the important obstacles of medical tourism development in Iran and worldwide (2, 4, 5). Studies also show that the development of HT education as a distinct part of the health scope increases the efficiency and effectiveness of programs, decreases medical errors, and increases satisfaction (6-9). In developed countries, priority strategy for policymakers in order to promote this market and avoiding its negative effects is to ensure training for employees (6, 10, 11) in less developed countries, due to the role of governments in developing medical tourism facilities, researches have emphasized the special focus of the public education system as well as private education systems (6). Recently also, international standards such as pass the training courses for physicians as one of the evaluation indicators have been proposed for the development of medical tourism (7, 12).

As stated before, during the past few years, Iran had no defined mechanisms for admission and treatment of international patients. Therefore, according to HT stakeholders in Iran, who were chief physician and nurses of the International Patient department, the physicians in charge of the facilitation tourism companies, and the managing directors of travel services offices, HT Skills-Based Courses were designed and implemented in 2016 in a 6 month period. These were national courses in collaboration with the Office of Supervision and Accreditation of Hospitals Affairs of the Ministry of Health and School of Health Management and Information Sciences of Iran University of Medical Sciences. Studies also show that training programs should be designed and implemented by policymakers for the effective performance of all stakeholders, not just clinical staff, through needs assessment of stakeholders and authorities as well as the use of legal programs (6, 13).

Thus, Curriculum of the basic course was exactly designed in accordance to today’s requirements and Hospitals’ International Patient department regulation and acquiring views of all involved organizations such as Cultural Heritage Organization, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and etc. For the quality and security maintenance of the courses, a variety of measures such as electronification of the sign-up process to certification, on-site take photos from the learner, security holograms, the presence of ministerial experts and non-government funding have been embedded.

The first Advanced Course was held with the focus on “Marketing and Branding in HT” with a Skill-based Workshop in May 2019. In fact, advanced courses were designed and developed in response to the demand of HT activists and urgency to respond to this requirement over a

¹ Department of Health Services Management, School of Health Management and Information Sciences, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
² Deputy of Treatment, Ministry of Health, Tehran, Iran
³ Department of Community Medicine, School of Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
⁴ Department of Orthopedics, School of Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
the effects of medical tourism in destination and departure countries? A scoping review. Int J Equity Health. 2010;9:24.

10. Crooks VA, Li N, Snyder J, et al. “You don’t want to lose that trust that you’ve built with this patient...”: (dis)trust, medical tourism, and the Canadian family physician-patient relationship. BMC Fam Pract. 2015;16:25.

11. Ganguli S, EBrahim AH. A qualitative analysis of Singapore’s medical tourism competitiveness. Tourism Manag Perspect. 2017;21:74-84.

12. Fetscherin M, Stephano R-M. The medical tourism index: Scale development and validation. Tour Manag. 2016;52:539-556.

13. Schobersberger W, Hoffmann G, Humpeler E. The Growing Role of Health in Tourism. In: Kronenberg C, Müller S, Peters M, Pikkaema B, Weiernair K, editors. Change Management in Tourism from ‘Old’ to ‘New’. Tourism. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag; 2008.p. 113-129.

14. Strauss-Blasche G, Reithofer B, Schobersberger W, Ekzmkicioglu C, Markl W. Effect of vacation on Health: Modrating factors of vacation outcome. J Travel Med. 2005;12:94-101.

15. Heydari Chianeh R, Nasrollahzadeh Z, Abdollahi M. An Evaluation of Tourism Higher Education in Iran Based on SWOT Model. Tourism Plan Develop. 2012;1(1):129-152.

16. Blank C, Riedler C, Schobersberger W. Academic Education in Health Tourism—Knowledge about and Willingness for Academic Training within the Field of Health Tourism: A Cross-Country Evaluation within the German-Speaking Alpine Area. J Tourism Hosp. 2013;2:109.

17. Berg W. Gesundheits tourismus und Wellness tourismus. Oldenburger Verlag Wissenschaftsverlag GmbH, München; 2008.

18. McKercher B. The future of tourism education: An Australian scenario? Tourism and Hospitality Research. 2002; 3(3):199-210.

19. http://www.bbwschule.de/masters-program-in-business.html

20. https://fh-joanneum.at/gesundheitsmanagement-im-tourismus/master/en/my-studies/degree-programme/

21. https://www.th-deg.de/en/agw/courses/itm-b-en/subjectoverview?highlight=WyJtZWRpY2FsliwidGJ1cmlzbSIsIm1lZGljYWwgdG91cmlzbSIsImlkIn0&

22. http://www.compleuniversityguide.co.uk/courses/610395

23. http://uni.sze.hu/en_GB/bsc-BA-courses

24. http://www.jliedu.com/programs/detail/professional-diploma-in-medical-tourism-healthcare-marketing

25. http://www.ait.ie/aboutaitandathlone/courses/bahonsinwellnesstourismmanagement/

26. https://www.th-deg.de/en/agw/courses/itm-m-en