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## **COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SELECTED COUNTRIES (TURKEY, MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE, AND THAILAND) IN ORDER TO ENTER THE TOURISM MARKET AND ATTRACT TOURISTS WITH IRAN AND PROVIDE PROPER SUGGESTIONS FOR IRAN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nowadays, in the world, health tourism market has been considered as one of the profitable and competitive industries. Health tourism is a component with two important and critical combined constituents. This two-dimensional phenomenon when combined brings about a third concept that one cannot manage this concept without experience and the emergence of new perspectives in these two components. Since the 1990s, several factors have made health tourism more prosperous in Asian countries. The Asian financial crisis, the reasonable changes in world currency exchange rate, upgrading and improving medical equipment quickly, information technology (IT) development, high quality and low cost of health services, and countless other factors have led some Asian countries to be announced as the world health tourism destinations. The entrepreneurship, marketing and the pervasive advertising of these countries along with providing medical services together with tourism, have increased the attractiveness of these destinations for attracting foreign tourists for treatment and cause the orientation of macro policies of these countries with regard to this growth of this division of tourism industry. At the macro level, in most of the countries, governments and governmental entities are interested in taking advantage of the economic benefits of this industry and at the micro level, hospitals and different providers of travel and medical services in competition with each other, also try to raise their share of this advantage. Despite having hot and mineral water springs, conducting fundamental and applied studies in line with cellular sciences and reproductive technologies, treating incurable diseases, non-invasive treatment methods, developing vaccines to prevent and eradicate many diseases and training of specialist personnel, Iran, so far, has not been able to develop tourism infrastructure and have a significant share in line with developing medical tourism by means of suitable planning and policy-making and scientific marketing. Revenue resulted from health tourism can be useful for our country that thinks about developing. Knowing the target markets, entrepreneurship, providing new ideas and proper marketing in this field are of the important and significant features in line with health tourism development in Iran. The current research has been done to compare Iran with other selected countries in this field and defines the importance of the health tourism in Iran, tries to recognize effective promoter and preventive factors in line with promoting medical tourism and ways to attract patients to the country.

**Keywords:** Tourist, Tourism, Health Tourism, Medical Tourism, Curative Tourism, Wellness Tourism, Tourism Market

### **INTRODUCTION**

At present, tourism economic feature is changing and it is one of the most important and critical components of the world economy, and this factor plays a significant role in this field. In addition to this feature, most of the planners and officials in the field of economic development have considered tourism industry as one of the most important pillars of economic development. Health tourism as a dimension of tourism consists of any form of travel with the aim of health development. Health tourism, likewise, is an international policy in line with increasing country revenue (Nilipour et al., 2015). The strategic and special geographical location, the wonderful and ancient medical history and Iranian medicine, the presence of skilled and well-known doctors in various fields of medical services can turn Iran into a medical tourism hub of the region. Special geographical location of Iran in the region can help this country to attract thousands of patients annually in its medical centers. Brilliant and ancient medical history of this country among other countries of the world has made it a strong point in line with realizing the tourist attraction of the country and Iranian doctors working inside and outside the country have always been at the spotlight of the world's scientific and medical communities (Izadi et al., 2012). Amongst a diverse field of tourism, health tourism and its subcategory such as “medical tourism”, “curative tourism”, and “wellness tourism”, have received more attention due to their proficiencies and competitive advantages and has manifested higher growth among other forms of tourism (Izadi et al., 2012). Merging medicine and tourism, nowadays, has been considered as a new form of tourism field. Health tourism is a component with two important and critical combined constituents. The two-dimensional phenomenon when combined will provide a third concept that cannot be managed without experience and emergence of brand-new ideas in these two constituents. Shortening the distances due to transport and information technology industry growth has led to the establishment of world markets for services, and industrialized and developing countries, relying on their relative advantages in competing with others are searching their share in these markets (Haghighi Kafash et al., 2009).

Nonetheless, the presence of an expert and proficient doctors and natural and numerous attractions of Iran can attract many tourists. In the meantime, due to many reasons, these amenities have not been used appropriately and there has been no serious action in line with attracting tourists and the resulted foreign exchange earnings, and no significant contribution has been established with regard to the development of the health tourism industry in Iran (Comprehensive tourism portal of Iran, 2011). At the moment, among Asian countries, we will compare those countries they are more similar to Iran than other countries in terms of natural geographical location, climate, geographical location, population, economic and political characteristics, climatic and cultural features, and development rate and according to these similarities we can investigate health tourism precisely and use the results of this investigation. Since health tourism is a novel notion in Iran, the main challenge in this field is preparing a design and program that pay attention to this concept comprehensively, also the experiences of successful countries in this context can help policymakers to implement a scientific and native approach to attract medical tourists.

### ***Theoretical Background of the Research***

**Tourism:** Tourism is a set of activities that happen during a tourist trip. This procedure consists of different activities such as trip planning, traveling to a destination, staying and coming back even remembering the memories of that trip. This process also includes other activities that



tourist do as a part of the trip such as buying different goods and interaction between host and guest. Generally, tourism due to its interdisciplinary nature has different perspectives which lead to different definitions of this concept. In the preliminary definitions, the dimension of distance has been declared mainly and tourists were categorized based on the distance from their residence. So that the United States National Tourism Commission (1973) in line with the definition of domestic tourism, considered a distance of fifty miles which included all trips except traveling to work. The definitions of distance, regardless of mistakes and errors, were accepted only because they prepared an economic and statistical quantity for the tourism phenomenon. While these distance definitions alone could not designate tourism well, they highlighted the demand dimension, ignore the supply and the effects caused by tourism. Hence tourism necessitates other definitions. Other definitions are mentioned based on this context, each of which describes tourism in various dimensions. In the geographic dimension, tourism is defined as spending leisure activities or recreational activities requiring night absenteeism from the habitat.

**Health Tourism:** In this form of tourism, people mainly travel to a destination with the medical intentions. In these trips, someone may be with the patients that they are also considered as medical tourists. In these trips, the patient travel for treatment, recovery, climate change and also use mineral water based on the doctor recommendations. Those cities that have equipped hospitals, specialist doctors or mineral waters are of the aims and destinations of these tourists. Health tourism is one of the main constituents of tourism development in Europe. At first, Romans shaped tourism but the stagnation took place and again in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in response to bad health conditions, truism many became dominant in many cities. Nowadays in France, health centers have been very modern and have added a lot of facilities to themselves. Likewise, the prevalence of health farms in Europe and the United States is very high today, and men and women travel there to lose their weight. A very modern form of health tourism is the people's abroad trip to utilize the health services of institutions that are well-known in their profession worldwide.

**Health tourism in Iran:** After Jordan, Iran has the highest capacity and capabilities in the field of health tourism among Islamic countries. Correspondingly, in terms of climatic distinction and many sightseeing and pilgrimage attractions, for attracting curative tourists the country has a good potential. Iran has numerous capacities to attract health tourists, which are mineral water springs in most provinces of the country, desert areas in Qom, infertility treatment departments in Yazd, cardiovascular, plastic, and eye surgeries in Mashhad and Tehran. Though apparently there is no concern in the country for its progress, and this industry is going to be destroyed by the onslaught of brokers.

- ***Proper facilities***

In our country, there are proper conditions, facilities, and infrastructures. Training qualified manpower (Medical staff, nursing), innovative utilities and proper cultural and social condition in the region have made the suitable potential to attract medical tourists, to the country. In addition to this fact, the existence of cities that have been the place of usual location of transit and the arrival of foreign tourists and provided medical facilities to foreign patients (such as Mashhad and Shiraz), and has traditionally been the reference point for a number of foreign patients (Arabs of the Persian Gulf) have created significant potential in this area. Lower prices of medical services compared with other countries of the region are of the



other advantages of Iran to be active in the field of health tourism and treating diseases such as infertility, plastic surgery, and beauty, also tooth implantation and gum surgery, are of the most important curative attractions for foreigners in Iran, but the only medical facilities in the country cannot attract these tourists to Iran. Hot water springs are of the best options in order to attract this group of tourists; with the aim of building tourist resorts recreational centers and facilities in these places, we can many tourists. One of the attractions and advantages of Iran for curative tourists is in the field of hydrotherapy so that more than one thousand mineral springs have been identified in the country; there are numerous sources for of medical tourism demand in Iran. More than 3 million Iranians are resident abroad, about half of whom are living in the United States. Lack of insurance coverage or little insurance coverage, accompanied by treatment high cost of abroad, and has caused Iranian people living abroad to receive health care at a very low cost in Iran. With regard to advantages in health tourism, such as low cost, high quality of health services, proficient physicians and having plenty of natural attractions, Iran has decided to use these advantages. In this field, the Ministry of Health and Medical Education has also approved legislation entitled Terms and conditions of medical centers for health tourists, in which these conditions are specified in 6 clauses. These six clauses are:

1. General conditions
2. Manpower
3. Medical equipment
4. Geographical conditions
5. Additional conditions
6. Principles for the medical center's websites

On the other hand, activity in the health tourism context should not lead to increased government tenure. There are many capabilities and capacities in our public and private hospitals, but the main context for health tourism activity should not be subjected to government intervention; nonetheless, the government must have only facilitating role.

Inspecting the health tourism industry denationalization strategies by preserving the government supervisory role that prevents the government from becoming obese, and at the same time the private sector active in this context must have the necessary standards for activity, are of the strategies that should be taken into account in the field of policy-making. The Health Village is a medical center that affords primary and secondary health, wellness care for patients in a distinctive environment. Actually, these centers are economic complexes that are more closely monitored and controlled by the private sector, not the public sector. Health villages are a kind of philosophy ahead of time and are continuously emerging and designed with the infrastructure that allows all clients to take advantage of the health services and transfer in the village. Those regions which, in addition to the proper environmental condition of tourist attractions and communication infrastructure in different parts of the country, have the capacity to build specialized medical complexes and clinics - in line with the natural conditions of the area - can become a health village. The initial and fundamental principles that are commonly observed in health villages are:

- Providing the premium medical services
- Relationship
- Customer-friendly care



- Customer service provision
- Comfort and access

**Important factors in line with attracting health tourist or foreign patient to Iran:** The lower cost of treatment, that in most cases the cost of treatment in Iran relative to Europe is 10 to 1, and also the high-quality medical equipment are of the important factors in attracting foreign patients to Iranian healthcare centers. While medical equipment is very important, which is much more important than medical equipment is the proficiency of physicians and fortunately, Iranian doctors have a high level of proficiency. These days, Iran has made significant progress in the field of medicine, while, up to 30 years ago, in most of the provincial centers we had Indian doctor, and sending patients abroad for treatment was one of the main complications of the health system in the country. This is while today, instead of Indian doctors, in more than 60,000 villages, fellow doctors are involved in the sacred profession of medicine, and almost no one moves for more than a few kilometers from his or her place of residence for normal surgeries. Although there are some insufficiencies in post-surgical care in the health system, it is unlikely that anywhere in the world, such as Iran, surgery will take place with this power and there is no doubt that providing the most reliable medical services in the Islamic Republic Iran is possible. The Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization of Iran, has shaped the Health Policy Tourism Council, with the membership of representatives of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Welfare, Director General of Development and Investment Plans, Secretary of Health Tourism Headquarters (Tourism Therapy), Head of Marketing and Advertising, and Director General of Heritage Resources and Funding Cultural and tourism organizations, head of which is the tourism deputy of this organization.

One of the other uncompleted programs in the Ministry of Health was the issuance of a health visa, in case of agreement by the Department of State, privileges will be considered for the recipients of this visa, the quick issuance of a visa is one of the privileges of this visa.

**The content of the Fourth Development Plan in line with Health Tourism in Iran:** Considering its advantages in the field of medical tourism, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as low cost and high quality medical and therapeutic services has decided to take advantage of opportunities. At the moment in some sciences, such as stem cells and repairing spinal cord injuries, Iran is one of the world's leading countries. Similarly, in the fields such as infertility and invasive debates, radiology, kidney and liver transplantation can compete with advanced countries of the world (the cost benefits of many services should be considered in addition to the qualitative advantages of the above), considering these advantages leads the Law on the Fourth Development Plan (LAW) to define the increase in revenue generated by this type of tourism as a legitimate task of the Ministry of Health. Accordingly, by the end of the fourth development plan, the Ministry of Health of the Islamic Republic of Iran ought to provide 30% of its currency revenues by the goods export, medical services, and health tourism. Meanwhile, health tourism can bring significant income.

#### ***Experimental Background of the Research***

Turani, Tabibi, Tofiqi and Sherbafchi (2010), in a study entitled “International Health Services Trade in the Selected Countries of ASEAN members (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations); Challenges and Opportunities” scrutinized three countries of Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand to provide a general summary of the status of health services international trade





in the mentioned region, and compared the opportunities and challenges of this trade, this research is a part of a descriptive-comparative research and it is used in the field of health services international trade, and the researchers found that the most significant challenges of health services trade development in the ASEAN region, are quickening the authentication of services provider centers, the transferability of insurance, supporting private sector, cooperation of public and private sectors, and developing trade based on the relative advantages of each country in line with the health sector development.

Haghighi Kafash, Ziaie, and Jafari (2009), in a research entitled “Prioritizing factors related to the development of health tourism in Iran”, inspected the reason and the explanation of the health tourism underdevelopment in Iran and its widespread concept and the identification and prioritization of the related factors in the development of health tourism and by means of a designed questionnaire, from the perspective of the tourists healthcare business practitioners, three factors of "branding for Iran in the field of treatment", "full coordination of health tourism-related institutions", and "the existence of policymakers of proctor intersectoral institutions" includes the first to third priorities in the health tourism development of the country.

Nilipour, Taghvai, Nasr Esfahani and Kouhi Esfahani (2015), conducted a study with regard to the identification and prioritization of the effective factors in tourism development that the main aim of this study was to identify and prioritize effective factors in health tourism in Isfahan province. In terms of the research purpose, this is descriptive and in terms of results, it is applied. The statistical population of this research consists of experts familiar with the health tourism industry in Isfahan and 20 experts available were used as sample in 2014, and the information obtained through the questionnaire and TOPSIS method was used for factors prioritization and, finally, the prioritization results indicated that the cost of treatment is the most important factor and has precedence in the health tourism progress, and in the other priorities there are other factors such as well-trained and well-known medical staff familiar with foreign language, a suitable cultural environment and social security for Muslim countries, benefiting from suitable infrastructure in the air transport sector, religious rules and laws, the existence of a specific medical visa and ease of visa issuance, the availability of facilities in the technology sector for electronic payments, and the establishment of electronic communication and telecommunication, the existence of numerous international specialized medical centers for the health tourism development of Isfahan province.

Izadi, Ayyubian, Nasiri, Joneydi, Fazel and Hosseinpourfard (2012), in a study entitled “The health tourism condition in Iran; research opportunities and challenges with the aim of examining the status of health tourism and determining the special advantages of Iran” concluded that Iran can signify its role in this market by investing more and more in its strengths and introducing them as their unique capabilities in providing services, also in the field of corrective points can achieve the desired result by making a comprehensive plan, marketing and modifying some of the processes.

Mostafavi, Shamsi Kooshaki and Abbasi (2012), in the field of ethics in health tourism, in line with investigating the ethical issues in three aspects of organ transplantation, abortion and fertility technologies, concluded that the existence of some facilities in some cases increased the preference of citizens of other countries to travel Iran and receive health services but there



were no written ethical guidelines for this area and they indicated that such guidelines should be compiled.

According to theoretical fundamentals, the research questions are compiled as follows:

1. How is health tourism market in Singapore?
2. How is attracting health tourists done in Singapore??
3. How is the health tourism market in Thailand?
4. How is attracting health tourists done in Thailand?
5. How is the health tourism market in Malaysia?
6. How is attracting health tourists done in Malaysia?
7. How is the health tourism market in Turkey?
8. How is attracting health tourists done in Turkey?
9. How is health tourism market in Iran?
10. How is attracting health tourists done in Iran?

### *A Conceptual Model of Research*

## **METHOD**

This research is a descriptive study. Since the interviewing tool and the questionnaire are used to measure the research variables by means of field method, the current research can be categorized as a survey study and, on the other hand, with regard to the results applicability; this research can be considered as an applied research. In the current research, the data collection instrument is an interview and a questionnaire; consequently, data collection is done in three phases:



### *A) Library studies:*

**A.1) Note-taking:** Collecting data in line with health tourism includes tourism history, health tourism concepts, countries that are doing health tourism, the status of countries, rules and its regulations, incomes and tourist attraction, and other significant subjects in the current research. Data were gathered from available sources in libraries and scientific sites, research that contains different books, valid journals, articles, theses, and scientific reports.

### *B) Field studies:*

At the field stage, data were collected by means of interviewing tool and questionnaire.

**B.1) Semi-structured interview:** This tool is one of the most common research tools and it is a direct research data achieving method. Conducting interview consists of the art of asking the accurate questions and carefully listening to what the interviewee says and what the interviewee does not say. In the present research, a semi-structured oral interview, from facilitator organizations, activists and specialists in the field of health tourism, was used.

**B.2) Questionnaire with open-end questions:** In this type of questionnaire, questions are raised and the interviewee is asked to write his or her answers. In this type of questionnaire, the question answer is not precise and limited, and the respondent writes the question answers. In

this research, questionnaires were used in two groups of international patients entering Iran and who can be studied in this area.

### *Analyzing the research results*

In all of the conducted interviews, each one announced health tourism as one of the prime tourism profitable industries and given the country potentially, health tourism is considered as a great opportunity for Iran. Providing health and curative services with the highest quality, enhancing the quality of medical equipment, lowering health care costs to the extent that do not weaken the treatment quality, likewise proper publicizing and content production are of the important factors in the country's branding in the field of health tourism. The great weakness of Iran in the field of health tourism consists of authorities' lack of attention to this field and the lack of unitary custodianship, not having joint circular and articles of association, lack of marketing and proper and scientific advertising, not having accurate statistics of health tourists in Iran, illegal brokers and intermediaries, lack of a fixed price list for health services, lack of appropriate communication between hotels and health centers, lack of communication with foreign patients, lack of confidence building for international patients and, finally, weakness in the treatment of cancerous diseases, and strong points of Iran are experienced and skilled doctors, enhancing the quality of health care services compared with countries of the region, the presence of robust medical centers, the existence of traditional medicine and Islamic aspect of the country and the Mashhad city as the spiritual capital of for 11 consecutive years, and finally, they provided several suggestions, such as creating the similar custodian, founding health holding, syndication, establishing common laws, controlling illegal brokers and intermediaries, content production and scientific marketing.

- *The findings of the selected countries*

#### 1. Turkey

**Table 1: The initial information of Turkey**

Row	Issue	Results
1	Custodianship	Ministry of Health (Organization for the Development of Medical Tourism)
2	Activity onset	2005
3	Income	\$ 390 million
4	Facilities	Equipped Hospitals and the World's Largest Eye Hospital
5	Insurance	Health insurance plan
6	Advertising and marketing	Reasonable costs of health services

#### 2. Thailand

**Table 2: The initial information of Thailand**

Row	Issue	Results
1	Custodianship	Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Exports and the Ministry of Health in cooperation with private hospitals
2	Activity onset	1970
3	Income	\$ 101 billion (2006)
4	Facilities	Asia's largest private hospital
5	Insurance	Does not have
6	Advertising and marketing	Creating social networks and tourism campaigns



### 3. Malaysia

**Table 3: The initial information of Malaysia**

Row	Issue	Results
1	Custodianship	Formation of Health Tourism Committee
2	Activity onset	1998
3	Income	\$ 78 million (2007)
4	Facilities	Equipped laboratories and specific tests
5	Insurance	Does not have
6	Advertising and marketing	Attractive medical tourism packages

### 4. Singapore

**Table 4: The initial information of Singapore**

Row	Issue	Results
1	Custodianship	Ministry of Commerce and the Board of Industry Economic Development and Ministry of Health
2	Activity onset	Lacks a specified date in valid sources
3	Income	102 billion dollars (2007)
4	Facilities	9 hospitals and 2 medical services centers with JCI credentials
5	Insurance	The support of insurance companies
6	Advertising and marketing	The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the countries of the Middle East and the presentation of specific international courses and conferences



### 5. Iran

**Table 5: The initial information of Iran**

Row	Issue	Results
1	Custodianship	Lack of Integrated Custodianship
2	Activity onset	2003
3	Income	\$ 500 million in 2016
4	Facilities	Equipped hospitals and hot water centers
5	Insurance	Does not have
6	Advertising and marketing	At the level of websites of health tourism companies

- *Table obtained from questionnaires*

**Table 6: The factors affecting the therapist country selection from the international patients' perspective**

Row	Factors	International Patients' opinion (Percent)		The amount of influence on the choice			
		Positive	Negative	High	Moderate	Low	Ineffective
1	Therapeutic equipment	%100	0	✓			
2	Accommodations	%94.28	%5.71	✓			
3	The language of Therapist Country	%91.42	%8.57	✓			
4	Familiarity with the Therapist Country	88.57%	%11.42	✓			
5	Ease of visa admission	%85.71	%14.28	✓			

6	International education	%82.85	%17.14	✓			
7	Impact of IT Others' recommendation	%80	%20	✓			
8	Political stability Standard and quality	%77.14	%22.85	✓			
9	Economic stability Medical expenses	%74.28	%25.71		✓		
10	Geographical distance	65.71%	34.28%		✓		
11	The rules of the therapist country	%62.85	%37.14		✓		
12	Facilitating companies and private sector	%60	%40		✓		
13	Geographical conditions	%28.57	%71.42			✓	
14	Sense of belonging	%20	%80			✓	
15	Presence of acquaintances	%8.57	%91.42				✓

According to Table 6, the most effective factor in therapist country selection from the international patients' perspective in Iran is the high-quality medical equipment and modernity, after this factor there were other factors at higher level of positive answers and effectiveness which are accommodations, the language of the therapist country, familiarity with therapist country, the ease of visa admission, spending International training courses by specialists and doctors, IT science, others' recommendations, political stability, and standard and quality and at the average level there are factors which are economic stability, medical expenses, geographical distance, therapist country laws and The existence of facilitators and private sector companies. The least effective factor is the geographical condition and the sense of belonging to the therapist country and finally, the presence of Acquaintances and relatives in the therapist country is an ineffective factor in the treatment destination selection.

**Table 7: Important factors in therapist country selecting from the experts' perspectives**

Row	Factors	International Patients' opinion (Percent)		The amount of influence on the choice			
		Positive	Negative	High	Moderate	Low	Ineffective
1	Therapeutic equipment Standard and quality The language of Therapist Country	% 100	0	✓			
2	Impact of IT International education	% 94.28	% 5.71	✓			
3	Accommodations Ease of visa admission	%91.42	% 8.57	✓			
4	Political stability	% 82.85	% 17.14	✓			
5	Medical expenses The rules of the therapist country	% 80	% 20	✓			
6	Economic stability	% 77.14	% 22.85	✓			
7	Familiarity with therapist country	% 68.57	% 31.42		✓		
8	Geographical distance	% 57.14	% 45.85		✓		
9	Others' recommendation	% 22.85	% 77.14			✓	
10	Geographical conditions Presence of acquaintances	% 14.28	% 85.71				✓
11	The sense of belonging	% 11.42	% 88.57				✓
12	Facilitator and the private sector companies	0	% 100				✓

According to the facts specified in the table above, the most effective factors in line with selecting a therapist country by experts are high quality and modern medical equipment, standard and quality and language of the therapist country, and after these factors there are other factors with highest level of positive answers which are information technology (IT) science, passing international training courses for professionals and doctors, accommodations, ease of visa admission, political stability, medical expenses, rules of therapists country and economic stability, at the next level and stage which is consisted of moderate answers there are factors which are familiarity with the therapist country and the geographical distance, the others' recommendation is at a weaker level. The most ineffective factor is the geographical condition, the presence of acquaintances and relatives, the sense of belonging and the lack of facilitators and the private sector companies in line with selecting the treatment destination.

**Table 8: Comparing the effective factors in line with selecting the therapist country between the patients' perspective and experts' perspective**

Row	Factors	Positive Comments (%)		Disagreement			
		The experts	International patients	High	Moderate	Low	No
1	Geographical conditions	14.28 %	28.57 %		✓		
2	Sense of belonging	11.42 %	20 %			✓	
3	Therapeutic equipment	100 %	100 %				✓
4	The rules of the therapist country	80 %	62.85 %		✓		
5	Presence of acquaintances	14.28 %	8.57 %			✓	
6	Others' recommendation	22.85 %	80 %	✓			
7	Geographical distance	57.14 %	65.71 %			✓	
8	Economic stability	77.14 %	74.28 %			✓	
9	Political stability	82.85 %	77.14 %			✓	
10	Medical expenses	80 %	74.28 %			✓	
11	Ease of visa admission	91.42 %	85.71 %			✓	
12	Familiarity with the Therapist Country	68.57 %	88.57 %		✓		
13	Accommodations	91.42 %	94.28 %			✓	
14	Standard and quality	100 %	77.14 %		✓		
15	International education	92.28 %	82.85 %			✓	
16	The language of Therapist Country	100 %	91.42 %			✓	
17	Impact of IT	94.28 %	80 %		✓		
18	Facilitating and private sector companies	0	60 %	✓			

According to the data offered in Table 8, after comparing the responses of the two groups of interviewees in the results of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the therapeutic equipment factor is the first and most effective factor in line with selecting the therapist destination with the zero difference. Factors with a moderate difference were at the next level that these factors are as follows: geographical conditions, the rules of the therapist country, familiarity with the therapist country, and the standard and quality of services and the factors of sense of belonging, presence of acquaintances, geographical distance, economic stability, political stability, medical expenses, ease of visas admission, accommodations, passing



international courses of specialists and doctors, language of the therapist country and information technology (IT) science were in the third level with a lower difference, and finally the others' recommendation and the presence of facilitating and the private sector companies with extreme differences were in the fourth level of effective factors in choosing the treatment destination by the two interviewees groups.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the outcomes of the current research, the findings indicate that Iran has considerable strengths such as skilled doctors, updated technology and natural health areas to attract health tourists. Similarly, from the international health tourists' perspective, in Iran, there are high quality medical equipment and accommodations, but this sector is associated with weaknesses and challenges such as the lack of basic and therapeutic infrastructure, the lack of effective government support, the lack of the same custodianship, the lack of systematic development of medical tourism, lack of participation and intersectoral coordination at the macro and operational level, lack of health services provider centers with international credentials, lack of promotion and coherent marketing, inappropriate coordination of medical tourism organizations and inadequate planning. By means of investing more and more in its strengths and introducing them as exclusive proficiencies in providing services, Iran can further enhance its role in this market. In the field of modifiable points, depending on the case, the desired result will be achieved, by means of the comprehensive plans compilation, marketing and modification of some of the processes, eventually, if Iran wants to have a good share in the medical tourism market, it should take action to resolve the above challenges, also scientific and practical marketing, and appropriate strategies for attracting health tourism and promoting health tourism in the country, and improving the level of quality and service providing.

Since the present study is an applied research, to solve issues and resolve problems the researcher must provide suggestions that are the results of his scientific research. Then, after an overview of the research and the discussion and explanation of the results, suggestions must be made based on the findings of the research. Consequently, it is suggested:

### A. *Factors Affecting the Health Tourism Growth and Development*

- ✓ Branding
- ✓ Special attention to policy making in this section
- ✓ Full coordination of public and private sectors and institutions in line with the health tourism
- ✓ Investing to strengthen health tourism infrastructure
- ✓ Establish a private health tourism organization and support it
- ✓ Special support for active entities in this field
- ✓ Holding and participating in various health tourism exhibitions

### B. *Health tourism marketing methods*

- ✓ The first and the most important reliable source in line with health tourism is friends and relatives' recommendation.
- ✓ The second most reliable source of health tourism is online search.



- ✓ Using the capacity of business advisors to introduce the country's health potential
- ✓ Creating and establishing health tourism agency offices in target countries
- ✓ Advertising in target countries that can be comprehensive and general or capillary and limited, for example, one can use television advertising, and brochures and leaflets for distribution in tourist offices, and passengers' entrance and exit gates in order to do marketing.
- ✓ International Standards: By obtaining international standards, hospitals, clinics, and medical institutions, in addition to increasing international prestige, will also create reassurance for tourists. In addition to health centers; hotels, shipping companies, and other health tourism-related companies and sectors can also increase the arrival of medical tourists by acquiring international standards.
- ✓ Creating an opportunity for the acceptance of supplementary insurance of target market countries
- ✓ Advertising amusement and recreation centers for more willingness to travel for treatment
- ✓ Participating in international health tourism exhibitions
- ✓ Participating in domestic and foreign conferences in line with health tourism, business opportunities, and investment
- ✓ Participating in health tourism specialized training workshops
- ✓ Notification via the site, brochure
- ✓ Holding and participating in domestic and foreign familiarizing travels
- ✓ Participating in commercial and marketing boards of health tourism
- ✓ Membership in international organizations to sign contracts and being familiar with international rules and procedures
- ✓ Contextualization to enter international health services exportation such as a doctor, medicine, medical equipment
- ✓ Identifying the international patients' global target markets by means of modern marketing methods, market segmentation with the help of brokers and collaboration of the healthcare professionals and travel agents
- ✓ The arrangement of quality management
- ✓ Providing health tourism database
- ✓ Launching Multilingual Website



### ***C. Digital methods to develop health tourism brands:***

1. **SEO and increasing awareness:** If you provide great services, but someone cannot find your website, your services will not be important. Health tourism must use this field as a competitive advantage to attract customers. Search engine optimization (SEO) increases the chance that individuals can find you in cyberspace. Creating content on websites with new features and being up-to-date, using appropriate keywords, worthy links, relationship with social networks, SEO can significantly affect your brand. While SEO can be complex, there are things that any brand can do to help itself. Augmenting information and awareness with regard to this area or



using expert advisers in this can be helpful. But the most important element in SEO advancement is to create the desired content.

2. **Content creation:** Website, blog and social networking should provide the necessary information for both the medical needs and the travel destination for customers. Creating content on a site that people want to read, view and share is very important.
3. **To be seen:** By means of increasing the scope of work and information that is available to people, being seen needs more effort and concentration. The health tourism industry deals with two different fields, medical care, and tourism, and this factor can be considered a competitive advantage. Because you do not sell just one service, you are also selling a tourist destination that helps you to be seen. Try not to connect with customers only through a website or blog. Social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and other social networks can be extensively effective in line with being seen. Create novel and distinctive posts and give the audience the opportunity to share them. This increases the awareness of presence and service. Likewise, customers love to share their photographs. By means of participating in social networks, you can create the opportunity to share your images and also your brand by customers, which contributed significantly to promote your brand.
4. **Recommendations:** Most of the costumers around the world trust their friends and family members more than any other advertising source. The second most trusted source of customers is the information and messages that customers share in cyberspace. People are very accurate in travel planning, and they are more accurate in medical trip planning. It is very important to have positive and reliable recommendations. Social networks provide a space where people can express their opinions, concerns, and problems.
5. **Personal communication with customers:** Individuals prefer to be in touch with real people. They like a real relationship with brands. Completely personalized service must be provided to customers and we must do something that customers feel that they are important to the brand and are receiving their own personalized services. Being wherever your customers are online can be the first step. The second step is to be accountable and available to speak. The customer must feel that he and his health is the most important thing for you. Face-to-face communications such as Skype have created a global opportunity for two-way communication and increased trust. Earlier planning for a therapeutic process, patients have a tendency to consult with a physician to be familiar with their doctor, find an answer to their questions and concerns and be able to trust their physician. Video conferencing helps people, without having to worry about travel costs, reach the information and cases they need. Establishing personal relationships with customers and facilitating these connections as much as possible will have numerous benefits. And lastly, the tourism industry has been able to control the power of social media and cyberspace and use them, why the health tourism industry cannot do this.

#### *Research limitations*



The current research, like other studies, has some limitations. Some of the limitations of this study are the lack of comprehensiveness in research related to research subject within the country. A portion of other limitations is related to the scientific constraints of the research, which includes limited access to Iranian organizations (facilitating companies) which are active in the field of health tourism and marketing. Other limitations of this study include:

- Lack of access to library resources of valid and reference universities in the country and abroad
- Limited access to erudite academic experts in the field of health tourism
- In some cases, the questionnaire has to be reviewed and it's not possible for all the experts.

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