



# The healing touch

## Medical tourism in the UAE

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**What is medical tourism?**

Medical tourists are people traveling to other countries to seek various medical treatments that may be beyond their reach in their own country. Traditionally, patients travelled from developing countries to developed countries such as Switzerland and the United States in search of advanced medical facilities. Currently the trend has been reversed as people are travelling to developing countries in search of cost-effective or immediate medical solutions. An increasing number of countries are marketing themselves as medical tourist destinations, with various specializations to choose from.

Patients traveling overseas seek high quality medical facilities and access of care, but the most common reason is cost. The cost of a coronary artery bypass surgery in the United States can set a patient back US\$55,000 as compared to a cost of US\$27,000 for the same procedure in the UAE, and only US\$3,200 in India. Depending on the procedure and the location, patients can expect to save anywhere from 50–90 percent on the original costs.

**Main drivers in the popularity of medical tourism :**



Low cost in emerging markets



Immediate medical attention



Improvements in standards



Ease of international travel and globalization

Another important factor in driving the growth of medical tourism is the significantly long waiting periods in various countries for necessary medical treatments. In fact, even government healthcare authorities in western countries are offering patients the choice to travel abroad for quicker access to medical care. Due to the increase in the connectivity of airlines and reduction in travel costs, patients are more willing to travel across the globe. Advancements in technology and globalization of knowledge have also led to a marked improvement in the standards of healthcare provided in emerging markets.

The internet is another important factor in the growth of medical tourists, as patients can easily research the cost and quality of healthcare provided by various countries across the globe. A conscious consumer can choose the best location for the desired service, which has in turn led to the emergence of specialization in certain destinations.

# The UAE has high potential to become a hub for medical tourism due to its excellent infrastructure, availability of skilled professionals, government support and strategic location

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has projected that global healthcare spending is expected to accelerate by an average of 4.3 percent during 2015-2019, mainly fueled by the emerging markets in Asia and the Middle East. There were over 6 million medical tourists in 2015, a figure that is projected to rise to almost 10 million by 2020.

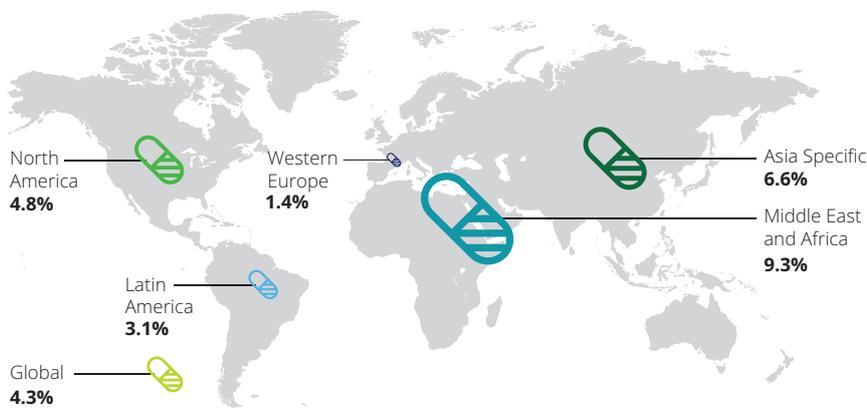
### The UAE as a medical tourism hub

The UAE has high potential to become a hub for medical tourism due to its excellent infrastructure, availability of skilled professionals, government support and strategic location. Since the UAE is one of the most popular tourist destinations of the world, it can attract and appeal to the whole family. The Medical Tourism Index has ranked the

country as the 16<sup>th</sup> preferred destination for medical tourism, and the UAE aims to reach the top five in the near future. The UAE has an efficient infrastructure in place for medical tourists as it is very well connected through its national airlines and is well known for its hospitality services.

According to the Dubai Health Authority, the emirate attracted 260,000 medical tourists in the first half of 2015, which is projected to rise to 500,000 by 2020, injecting revenues of around US\$700 million into the economy. A report by the DSC (Dubai Statistics Center) has revealed that the majority of the tourists who visited Dubai for medical treatment in 2015 came from Asian countries (43 percent), while 29 percent came from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The most popular treatments sought by the tourists were for osteoporosis, fertility, dermatology and plastic surgery.

### Medical tourism



Source: EIU

Medical tourism in the UAE is poised to become one of the highest growing markets due to the following factors:

### Growth potential

The UAE healthcare market is projected to grow at an average annual growth rate of seven percent (7%) between 2015 and 2020 to reach a market value of US\$19.5 billion, as per the *UAE Healthcare Sector Outlook 2020*. Healthcare tourists in Dubai can choose from over 30,000 healthcare professionals spread among 3,000 facilities. By 2020 these numbers are expected to grow to 40,000 healthcare professionals and 4,000 facilities. Some of the largest healthcare providers in the UAE, such as Aster DM Healthcare and NMC Health, have [▶](#)

**UAE healthcare forecast**



**UAE private sector beds**



**2,076 beds**  
in 2008



**2,566 beds**  
in 2011



**5,188 beds**  
in 2020

recently announced large expansion plans, opening new hospitals and medical centers.

**Quality of healthcare providers**

The Ministry of Health and Prevention in the UAE has said that over one hundred of its healthcare facilities have earned the Gold Seal Approval by JCI (Joint Commission International.) Government hospitals have played an important role in creating the necessary facilities and standards to develop medical tourism. However in the past few years, it is the private sector that has emerged as a driver in revamping and improving the excellence and standards of healthcare in the UAE. The healthcare industry has also been able to attract the best doctors, nurses and other professionals of different nationalities, making this region highly competitive in its standards of care.

**Government initiative**

The Dubai government has launched the world’s first comprehensive electronic medical tourism portal, as part of their medical tourism strategy. The portal promises to provide medical packages and travel and hospitality services at the click of a button. This is part of the initiative by which the UAE government is striving to connect healthcare providers with their airline partners, hotel operations and other agencies in order to provide a cost-effective comprehensive service package for patients. The UAE government has penciled the growth of the healthcare sectors as of one the pillars of its diversification and growth strategy, subsequent to the reduction in the revenue from the energy sector.

**Impact of medical tourism on the economy**

Medical tourism has the potential to have a positive impact on various other industries as well, leading to an

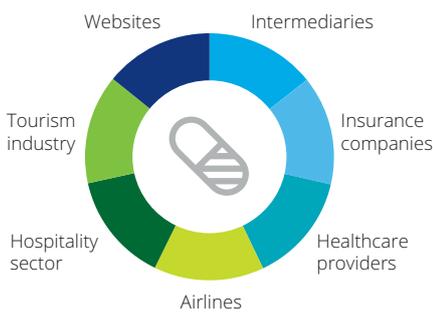
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incremental growth in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the economy as whole. An average medical tourist travelling to the UAE would procure airline and hotel services, travel to tourist destinations and purchase goods and services from local retailers. Therefore, various other industries can benefit from the influx of these tourists to the country, and it is not limited to the healthcare sector. The hospitality industry has already jumped on the bandwagon, by aligning itself with healthcare providers to include its services within the medical packages.

The rising demand for medical tourism has opened doors to another service industry called intermediaries that connect potential medical tourists with hospitals and other organizations. Companies that focus on medical tourism typically provide nurses or case managers to assist patients with pre-travel and post-travel medical concerns. *Salamatak*, for example, serves to connect medical tourists from abroad with practitioners in Dubai and provide comprehensive services during and after their stay. “In the past, usually patients had to go online and search for a doctor and it took a month or two,” said medical tourism facilitator Samer Mazahreh. “Now, within two days, medical tourists get a free medical consultation, there is

price transparency, and they have someone to book their flights, their tickets, their accommodation, their airport pick-up, to go with them to the doctors and translate,” he added.

**Medical tourism**



**Going forward**

The UAE has already positioned itself as one of the most visited countries in the world due to its strategic location and award-winning airlines. All the other factors mentioned above make the UAE,

and Dubai in particular, an attractive medical tourist destination, as long as the healthcare industry continues to invest heavily in expanding and improving the quality of its services. Going forward, to achieve the strategic plans and the economic vision of the UAE government, the healthcare industry should strive for the following:

- More cost-effective medical packages, as they are still high relative to other emerging markets.
- Attracting and retaining the best professionals and fostering an innovative environment.
- Digital media—attracting patients around the globe through social media platforms.
- Investing in the expansion of healthcare facilities.
- More collaboration with other industries such as hospitality, governments, tourism, to provide comprehensive packages.
- Attracting GCC patients who spend large amounts on seeking healthcare abroad.

**Conclusion**

There will be challenges ahead for the UAE Medical Tourism industry, but the potential is bright. In order to bring this vision to reality, the UAE government and the private healthcare groups need to work together harmoniously in seeking to attract larger number of patients to generate significant revenues. The UAE should continue developing and promoting its healthcare services in the GCC and abroad in the same way it has successfully developed and promoted itself as a top tourist destination. The backing of an ambitious government and continued investments from the private sector can go a long way towards realizing the dream of being one of the top five medical tourism destinations in the world. ●

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