

Chennai's Medical Tourism Sector

What is medical tourism?

Medical tourism occurs when patients travel internationally with the intention of obtaining privately funded medical care. Our research team, based at Simon Fraser University (in British Columbia, Canada), studies medical tourism from a number of perspectives.

What trends are occurring in Chennai's medical tourism industry?

Known as the Gateway to South India, Chennai is the largest city in the southern region of India and the state capital of Tamil Nadu. Tourism is a growing and important economic activity in the city, bolstered by a well-established medical tourism sector that accounts for a significant proportion of India's entire medical tourism industry. Indeed, the roots of medical tourism in India can be traced to Chennai, specifically the Apollo Hospital Group. Originally attracting patients from neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, the UAE, and the Maldives, the industry has expanded its clientele to include patients from more distant countries in North America and Europe. Increased flight connectivity with the US, the Middle East and other countries/regions makes Chennai an accessible destination for medical tourists. The city has also signed agreements with several countries in Africa that will automatically send any government-sponsored cross-border care patients to Chennai. Barriers to medical tourism in Chennai include lack of uniform pricing among hospitals, lack of insurance coverage for overseas medical care, and the rigorous visa procedures.

What our research is showing about the current state of medical tourism in Chennai, India:

- Medical tourism is experiencing consistent growth and represents a significant force in Chennai's tourism industry and local economy.
- While unaffordable and inaccessible to most citizens, India has a robust and dominant private health system that employs most of the total health workforce. Despite the existence of a universal healthcare system, the public system remains underfunded, understaffed and unevenly distributed; it is clear that the public system does not yet meet the needs of the local population.
- Currently, India's medical system is challenged by a significant outflow highly trained health workers leaving the country in pursuit of more gainful employment elsewhere. Medical tourism, which increases the demand for and creates opportunities in the higher paying private sector, may help retain health human resources and improve access to medical technologies.
- Given the potential for medical tourism to exacerbate already profound health equity concerns, such as large segments of the population experiencing economic deprivation and inadequate access to health care, development of the industry must not be undertaken in a way that will compromise achieving universal, quality healthcare for all local residents.

For more information: www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism/

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