

Medi Tourism – Fad or future?

In this short article Susan Stuart investigates the rapidly growing Global Medical Tourism Market - or what is often known as medi tourism and sheds light on what it is, where it takes place and who uses it.

What is the market worth?

The sector has changed dramatically in recent years and makes claims of becoming a \$100 billion business by 2012.



Who is demanding medical tourism?

You could say that anything of a cosmetic nature probably started in Hollywood and demand has evolved from there. With the western world now so obsessed by image, America, the UK and parts of Europe are quite amenable to the prospect of surgery to enhance beauty or wellbeing – finance permitting. Asia is up there as well but with many areas still developing economically it is perhaps much more a pastime of the very wealthy. So in short, it is a global phenomenon but as the Asian market suggests, it appears as pockets or what we would call in marketing as 'niche market sectors'. A

particular niche market is that of high net worth individuals and their families, globally.

Where are they going?

The web has made the world a smaller, more accessible place and so we think nothing of going for three, four, five or even six vacations a year. But are we prepared to travel the world for medical treatment. In some cases yes but still, in many cases no. It is almost as though we subconsciously do a risk assessment on the potential treatment. Can we die from having cosmetic dentistry or a crown? Probably not but having a cataract removed? Many of us would think twice about having our eyes operated on abroad.

The quality of treatment is a must and the majority of clinics do claim to meet various standards or accreditations, so concerns in this area are minimal but many people do have concerns about after-care. What happens if a wound re-opens post treatment that took place a few hundred miles away on a different continent? Currently in the UK the NHS claims to spend millions on rectifying procedures but this, I am sure, is something that no-one wants. For reduced risk and peace of mind, many will choose a well developed country that offers a good infrastructure. Where springs to mind? Often your own doorstep and with time being your greatest enemy, this often makes the most sensible option.

How to get customers from abroad to use your facilities?

This is the greatest battle that many wellness spas and medical clinics around the world face and why many are turning their clinics into lifestyle resorts one way or another. 'Champneys' is now a global brand that we are all familiar with but perhaps the latest in preventative healthcare, a 'Longevity Resort' (pictured) is more appealing. 'Longevity' is a new concept combining the benefits of Portugal's climate, five star hotel services and accommodation with a preventative approach to anti-aging, health and spa treatments purchased in a 'time-share' concept.



Making the product offer more user-friendly is seen to be a positive way forward for this sector potentially making it more attractive to the overseas buyer. Now, the product is becoming increasingly more sophisticated in its offering and in its packaging. With increased demand and increased supply, the question is, is supply keeping pace with demand? Long-term this is what will dictate the evolution of this market segment and many are already saying that the pace of supply is already out-stripping the increase in demand – the result being

increased competition. To combat this, in some places, instead of resorts, developers are using retail models to create a one-stop shopping destination in the form of a city, e.g., 'Dubai Healthcare City'. In other places e.g. India & Thailand the offering is simply a more competitive price.

"Medical clinics around the world are changing themselves into lifestyle resorts with hoteliers becoming the preferred industry expert on product development."

What treatments are people looking for?

To some extent our choice of treatment reverts to one's feelings about risk. There is a vast array of treatments on offer globally. Sometimes it is just either so difficult or impossible to find the treatment you wish in the UK that you do have to go abroad. Prices can vary dramatically with the best deals to be found in locations that specialise e.g., Hungary.



There is a huge demand for cosmetic dentistry with Eastern Europe dominating this product offer, to the point that many clinics now have 'mobile' clinics that visit the UK on a regular basis.

As a nation we are living longer so perhaps we have to consider the need for a cataract operation at the Hospital da Luz in Portugal for

around £2,400 may be something to consider.

Perhaps someone you know has a more pressing need and a decision is made to have stem cell therapy at the Villa Medica in Germany or Thailand, which ever is more convenient. Ultimately, we have to weigh up what offers the best value for money and best addresses our personal circumstances.

It is easy today to purchase a product online but with an estimated increase ten fold in medical tourism web pages in the last year it is easy to be confused. A new exhibition, 'Destination Health', opens at Olympia on 26th and 27th June 2010 and should provide an array of opportunities and information for the consumer. or www.treatmentabroad.com is an independent website offering advice in this area.

As a UK resident the attraction of going abroad for such treatment may hold a bit of a novelty factor at present but with a change in government and the UK economy facing challenges and potential public sector cutbacks, the NHS waiting lists may grow and the attraction of going abroad may suddenly seem considerably more attractive.

For those of you reading this that represent a resort or clinic it is worthwhile mentioning that latest statistics suggest that nearly 70% of bookings are sourced through the web. Here in the UK we generally short list about five options before booking one. The challenge faced by clinics is how, with perhaps 25 pages of a website out of 20 million medical tourism pages on the web, do you get potential customers to

even think of you? That is down to key target marketing addressing the personal needs of each segment and ensuring an effective engagement with all. Marketing must be viewed as an important investment, just like towels and sheets, not an expense.

Having finished this article I find myself thinking that there are an awful lot of balls currently being juggled in the air in the field of medical tourism and long-term how will they land and lie? One thing is for sure, change is on the horizon but in what form, only time will tell, so watch this space.

Susan Stuart, bio-summary –

Having spent a number of years in sales and marketing roles within 4*/5* hotels, Susan's more recent accomplishments have included re-launching the Roundhouse and the world renowned Old Spitalfields Market. During this time she has won a number of awards including the AEO award for development and innovation and also holds a Fellowship for the Institute of Sales & Marketing Managers.



Susan can be contacted through Bridget at bb@bridgetbaker.co.uk and will be attending Destination Health should you wish to arrange a meeting to discuss marketing strategies for this sector.