

A Narrative Review on Iran's Medical Tourism Growth and its Global Positioning

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Abstract: Health tourism has emerged as both a lucrative industry and a strategic way for countries to attract international visitors. Among its various branches, medical tourism plays a particularly important role in shaping the growth of the broader tourism sector. In recent years, Iran has become a key destination for medical travelers in the Middle East, drawing an increasing number of foreign patients seeking quality healthcare services. This narrative review explores the growth of medical tourism in Iran, analyzing the factors contributing to its rise and the country's position within the global landscape. The review begins by discussing the broader concept of health tourism, emphasizing medical tourism as a vital subfield., then turns to the specific motivations driving patients to choose Iran, as well as the distinctive features of the country's medical tourism landscape. It also presents relevant statistical insights and assesses how this growing sector contributes to the vitality of Iran's overall tourism industry. The review concludes by highlighting the challenges faced by Iran's medical tourism sector, such as infrastructure limitations and competition from other destinations, while suggesting strategic measures to enhance its global positioning. The findings underscore Iran's potential to significantly contribute to the global medical tourism market with targeted investment and systematic development.

Keywords: Medical Tourism, Health Tourism, Development of Medical Tourism, Iran Tourism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, health tourism has gained increasing importance among the various kinds of tourism in Iran. Several factors have contributed to this trend, including rising healthcare costs, limited insurance coverage, the availability of high-quality and cost-effective alternatives for patients seeking for treatment abroad. ^[1]

Globally, demand for healthcare services has grown significantly. Within the broader category of health tourism, medical tourism holds particular prominence. Long waiting lists, high treatment costs, and in some cases, the unavailability of advanced medical technologies have prompted individuals in developed countries to seek medical care in less developed or developing countries. ^[2] Factors such as the high cost of healthcare in developed countries, aging populations with growing healthcare needs and the increasing accessibility and affordability of high-quality medical services in developing countries have intensified competition in the global medical tourism market. ^[3]

Although Iran possesses substantial potential in the field of health tourism, it has yet to fully embrace its capabilities in promoting this sector. Nonetheless, in recent years, medical tourism (a key subcategory of health tourism) has experienced

noticeable growth and development. As a result, Iran has counted as one of the leading regional hubs attracting foreign patients for medical services. Given the capacity of Iran's healthcare sector and the significant advancements made in medical sciences in recent years, the role of medical tourism in supporting the growth of the national tourism industry has become increasingly evident. With appropriate planning and investment, Iran, as a central player in the Middle Eastern medical tourism scene, has the potential to position itself as a global destination in this field.

Understanding that medical tourism is a subfield of health tourism, any exploration of its development must begin with a clear understanding of the broader concept. Although there is no universally accepted definition of health tourism, it is generally described as travel undertaken with the primary aim of improving or maintaining health an endeavor influenced by demographic, economic, and lifestyle factors. Health tourism encompasses individual or group travel for therapeutic or rehabilitative purposes, including climate therapy, the use of mineral springs, and natural healing treatments. It involves activities linked to well-being and medical care, often motivated by the perceived health benefits of natural resources such as hot springs and medicinal plants. In essence, both individuals and groups pursue health tourism to take advantage of healing environments, climate variations,

and restorative experiences. Broadly speaking, tourism plays a significant and multifaceted role in the concept of health. ^[4]

II. THE NATURE AND HISTORY OF MEDICAL TOURISM

A. Nature of Medical Tourism

The World Tourism Organization defines health tourism as travel undertaken for more than 24 hours outside one's place of residence, for the purpose of improving or enhancing an individual's health and well-being through services such as spa treatments, climate therapy, or medical interventions. Similarly, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) provides a partial framework for understanding medical tourism by describing patients who travel abroad for treatments, often involving advanced or hard-to-access technologies, or for procedures such as phototherapy or dental care that may be either unavailable or prohibitively expensive in their home countries. These individuals are considered medical tourists.

In other words, medical tourism refers to travel undertaken for the purpose of receiving specific medical treatments or procedures at hospitals or medical centers outside one's country of origin, typically lasting two weeks or longer (Salem Harahsheh, 2002). Medical tourism necessarily involves medical intervention, with patients (suffering from either acute or chronic conditions) turning to conventional methods of treatment or, in some cases, unorthodox or scientifically unverified approaches (TRAM, 2006). ^[5]

B. Historical Background

Medical tourism in Iran has deep roots in the country's rich history of healing traditions and the work of pioneering scientists who harnessed Iran's abundant natural resources for therapeutic purposes. One of the earliest recorded systems of effective medical treatment was developed by Avicenna (Abu Ali Sina), one of Iran's most renowned and influential philosophers and scientists. His legacy helped shape the foundation of Iran's medical tourism. Avicenna classified natural healing resources into three main categories: spiritual retreats, therapeutic springs, and hot mineral waters. Each of which he systematically studied for its medical benefits.

Iran's diverse mineral springs (found in various regions of the country) contain over 30 different elements, including magnesium, potassium, sulfur, and calcium. Some even exhibit radioactive properties believed to contribute to healing. Historically, even warrior tribes were drawn to these springs, using them to recover from injuries and ease post-battle pain. Archaeological remains in Neyshabur suggest a sophisticated canal system once delivered spring water to the nearby Anahita Temple. While the therapeutic use of natural springs attracted foreign travelers to Iran centuries ago, the modern concept of structured medical and health tourism is relatively recent.

Iran's formal focus on health tourism began in 2003 when the Ministry of Health and Medical Education first took notice of the sector. The following year, it garnered the attention of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism. This marked the beginning of Iran's official efforts to develop its medical tourism industry. With strong capacities across various domains (medicine, health, and natural healing) Iran has made substantial progress in recent years, achieving notable milestones in the field. ^[6]

Iran's medical tourism has long attracted patients from neighboring countries, particularly from Persian Gulf nations, where cultural and ethnic similarities encourage medical travel to regions like Fars Province and the city of Shiraz. In recent years, Iran's northwestern areas, especially Tabriz, have seen a rise in patients from Azerbaijan and Iraq seeking medical services. Overall, the majority of Iran's medical tourists come from Persian Gulf and Central Asian countries. They are drawn by several factors: Iran's high standard of care compared to regional alternatives, affordable medical costs, and access to advanced treatments. These include specialized care in cardiology, organ transplantation (especially kidneys, cochlear implants, corneas, and livers), ophthalmology, infertility treatments, and cosmetic surgeries rhinoplasty being a prominent example.

III. TYPES OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN IRAN

Medical tourism in Iran can be classified into several distinct categories. As shown in Figure 1, this paper only refers to two categories.

One common classification organizes treatments based on the costs and risks associated with surgical procedures. Under this model, treatments are divided into three main levels (Rafei & Jafari, 2007):

- Minor Treatments, including dental procedures, cosmetic facial surgeries, ophthalmological treatments, and comprehensive health check-ups.
- Moderate Treatments, including hair and corneal transplants, infertility treatments, aesthetic procedures for various parts of the body, and angioplasty.
- Major Treatments, including complex internal and external surgeries such as organ transplants, cochlear implants, open-heart surgeries, spinal cord injury repair, and bone marrow transplants.

Another way to categorize medical tourism is based on patient interests and treatment duration (TRAM, 2006). According to this model, the field is divided into four main sub-sectors:

- Cosmetic Surgery
- Spa and Wellness Tourism
- Dental Tourism
- Fertility Tourism

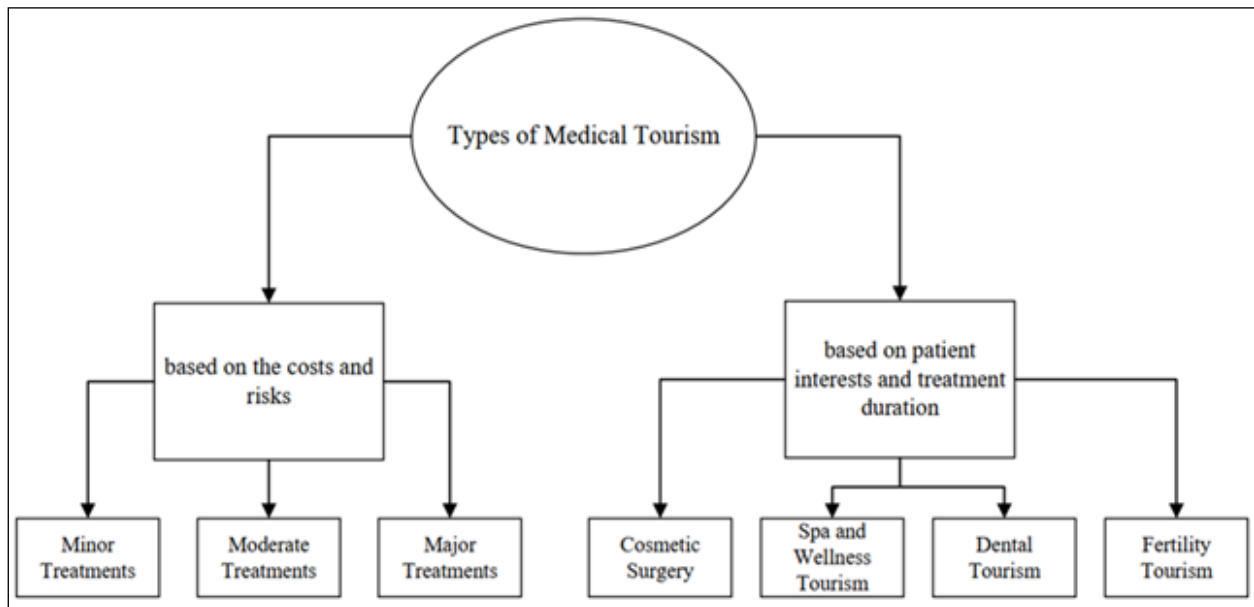


Fig 1 Types of Medical Tourism

The categorization of medical tourism continues to evolve, with new segments emerging over time and older ones occasionally becoming obsolete. Although Iran has made notable progress in developing its medical tourism sector in recent years, it still lacks some of the infrastructure necessary to fully support this industry. As a result, certain types of medical tourism may decline or shift to countries with better-developed infrastructure.

Furthermore, not all types of medical tourism are equally attractive to international visitors. For instance, tourists from Saudi Arabia primarily travel to Iran for cosmetic procedures, while visitors from Oman are more likely to seek complex surgical treatments and access to advanced medical care. These variations reflect both the specific medical needs of patients and the reputation Iran holds in different therapeutic domains.^[7]

IV. RESEARCH REGARDING INCENTIVES FOR MEDICAL TOURISM

Broadly speaking, the main motivations behind medical tourism can be summarized as follows:

Access to high-quality medical treatment in another country (including procedures not readily available at home); Lower treatment costs compared to the home country; The ability to avoid long waiting lists for medical procedures.

Beyond these core motivations, a deeper understanding of the components of the medical tourism system helps clarify the broader incentives involved.

The medical tourism system consists of Medical Tourists (the consumers of medical tourism products); Production and Destination Zones (the regions that provide medical tourism services and host medical tourists); Service Providers in the Medical Tourism Industry (including hospitals and clinics, suppliers, intermediaries, and supporting services).

Smith and Forgione (2007) proposed a two-stage model that illustrates the factors influencing a patient's decision to seek medical care abroad. Their findings suggest that no single factor determines the choice rather, it is a combination of influences.^[8]

Heung (2010) developed a supply-and-demand model for medical tourism, emphasizing both sides of the market. Building on the push-pull framework, Fetscherin and Stephano (2016) introduced a Health Tourism Index, which consists of four key dimensions: national environment, tourism destination appeal, cost of medical tourism, and the quality of healthcare services and infrastructure.^[9]

According to Ranjnoosh (2016), enhancing complementary tourism services and facilities is crucial for attracting more medical tourists and creating a competitive industry. Zarei (2016) emphasized that the use of social marketing tools can foster positive perceptions of health tourism destinations and strengthen the desire for medical travel.^[10]

Maboodi and Hakimi (2016) identified healthcare resources and promotional strategies as the most influential factors in the success of medical tourism. In a 2015 study, the quality of medical services was found to be the most decisive factor in determining a patient's choice of treatment destination.^[11]

Goodarzi (2014) highlighted that the development of medical tourism is positively and directly influenced by several quality-related factors, including healthcare services, tourism infrastructure, cultural assets, available facilities, and the integration of information technology. Furthermore, as costs increase, the likelihood of choosing a destination decreases and vice versa.^[12]

A study by Hadizadeh Moghadam et al. (2013) concluded that treatment costs, waiting times, diversity of available procedures, medical equipment, and social factors significantly influenced foreign patients' decisions to seek care in Iran. However, factors such as service quality, political stability, safety, and the attractiveness of tourist sites showed no statistically significant effect.^[13,14]

V. KEY FEATURES OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN IRAN

Iran has established itself as a significant player in the medical tourism sector, distinguished by its cost-effective healthcare services, advanced medical infrastructure, and highly trained specialists. In comparison to Western countries and regional competitors such as India, Iran offers substantially lower treatment costs without compromising the quality of care. It has demonstrated notable capabilities in various medical fields, including infertility treatment, cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, cardiovascular procedures, organ transplantation, and oncology. These advantages, coupled with the availability of state-of-the-art medical facilities and specialized personnel, have positioned Iran as a preferred destination for patients from neighboring countries, particularly those with cultural, religious, and linguistic affinities.

In addition to conventional medical services, Iran's medical tourism industry is supported by a diverse range of natural and traditional therapeutic resources. The country is home to numerous mineral springs, salt caves, and mud therapy sites, features that contribute to its potential in wellness and spa tourism. These alternative treatments have gained increasing international recognition and add a complementary dimension to Iran's healthcare offerings. While the sector faces certain structural limitations and regional competition, Iran's comparative advantages, including affordability, medical competence, and natural healing resources, reinforce its growing role as a medical tourism hub within the Middle East.^[15]

VI. RECENT STATISTICS ON MEDICAL TOURISTS IN IRAN

Iran's health tourism is primarily overseen by the Ministry of Health, which is responsible for formulating national policies in this field. According to statistics from the Health Tourism Department, of the approximately 960 hospitals operating in the country, 166 have been certified with an International Patients Department (IPD) license, officially authorizing them to admit and serve foreign patients. Data indicate that 70% of health tourism visits are

generated by international patients, with services concentrated in five key areas—obstetrics and gynecology, ophthalmology, orthopedics, cosmetic surgery, and cardiology—accounting for 30% of other medical services. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the Health Tourism Marketing Center in 2017 revealed that 50,000 foreign patients were hospitalized nationwide, generating revenues of \$1.2 billion and \$200 million, respectively. Moreover, the country's actual capacity in this sector is estimated to be five to six times greater than these figures; in 2018, over 70,000 foreign patients were hospitalized, and in the first quarter of 2019, approximately 16,000 patients—mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Oman, and Qatar—sought treatment, with more than 90% of them being referred to the country's 10 major academic hospitals such as Iran University of Medical Sciences, Qom University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Shahid Beheshti, and Avass Medical Sciences.^[16]

The president of the Iranian Health Tourism Professional Association has emphasized the strong demand for medical services among international visitors to Iran, noting that cosmetic surgery remains the most in-demand procedure among foreign patients. According to the most recent Medical Tourism Index published for 2020–2021, Iran ranked 46th out of 46 global medical tourism destinations, with an overall score of 44.38. This index is considered one of the most comprehensive and influential tools for evaluating the quality of health tourism destinations worldwide. It ranks countries based on 41 distinct criteria, including medical costs, service quality, healthcare infrastructure, and hospital credibility.

VII. THE ROLE OF FACILITATORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICAL TOURISM

The table 1 was designed based on the three-phase framework proposed by Ghaffari, Moeini, and Jafari (2022)^[17], illustrating the role of facilitators in the development of medical tourism. Adapted from their study on health tourism in Isfahan, the framework categorizes facilitator responsibilities into three sequential stages: pre-travel, during travel, and post-travel. Each stage outlines specific tasks that contribute to ensuring a smooth and comprehensive medical tourism experience. These include planning and coordination before travel, ensuring communication, cultural sensitivity, and care quality during the patient's stay, and managing follow-up care and evaluation after the patient returns home. clarifying how facilitators operate across the medical tourism process and highlights their critical role in improving service quality, patient satisfaction, and the overall effectiveness of health tourism development.

Table 1 Three-Phased Framework

Pre-Travel Phase:	During Travel Phase:	Post-Travel Phase:
1)Travel planning 2)Consulting with health insurance providers 3)Legal assistance and guidance 4)Medical consultations 5)Coordination with treatment-related services 6)Promotional and outreach activities to attract patients 7)Establishing communication between patients and healthcare personnel 8)Assisting in identifying appropriate medical centers 9)Clarifying disclaimers and risks 10)Assessing the credibility of physicians and institutions 11)Helping select the right destination 12)Travel logistics planning 13)Reducing waiting times 14)Assisting with visa applications 15)Providing travel, short trips, and entertainment packages	1)Advising patients in the interest of the host country 2)Assisting in gaining trust within the destination healthcare system 3)Facilitating doctor-patient communication 4)Supporting the development of cultural and social understanding 5)Creating a calm and recovery-oriented environment 6)Providing high-quality, responsible, and timely care 7)Supplying qualified interpreters	1)Addressing potential complications or liabilities post-surgery (e.g., risks during return flights) 2)Coordinating follow-up care both at home and post-return 3)Resolving post-treatment issues in the home country 4)Measuring patient satisfaction 5)Evaluating the quality of care and services provided

VIII. EFFECTIVE FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICAL TOURISM

The first major factor contributing to Iran being chosen as a medical tourism destination is the existence of incentive and facilitation bodies, as well as government support for the tourism sector. Institutional support for production and entrepreneurship fosters an environment conducive to innovation and the development of medical tourism.

The second key factor is the presence of capable administrators who are committed to implementing facilitative policies, devising long- and short-term strategic plans, and establishing effective performance evaluation systems. These efforts, alongside infrastructure development, play a vital role in creating the necessary conditions for Iran to attract international patients.

The third factor involves the availability of appropriate infrastructure, specifically, well-equipped medical centers, access to skilled physicians, and strong marketing systems. From the perspective of medical tourists, these are essential in choosing Iran as a healthcare destination.

The fourth category encompasses political factors such as national stability, legal protections for patients, and government support for visitors. A stable and secure political environment is critical to building trust among international patients.

The fifth factor relates to Iran's tourism potential, including its historical attractions and cultural assets. Shared language and cultural heritage with neighboring countries further enhances Iran's attractiveness as a destination.

The sixth and final category includes economic features such as the ability to accept foreign credit cards and conduct international transactions, as well as affordable treatment and accommodation costs. These financial aspects are fundamental in shaping patients' decisions. ^[18]

To further strengthen Iran's medical tourism sector, several additional measures are recommended. Treatment costs should be transparently and accurately disclosed to ensure patients are fully informed and to allow for proper monitoring of healthcare and tourism service quality. It is also essential to establish appropriate accommodation facilities that include internet access in patient rooms and culturally

tailored amenities. Medical centers should employ translators fluent in international languages, particularly English and Arabic.

Furthermore, developing multilingual websites focused on health tourism can help patients access essential information (such as hospital and physician profiles, treatment costs, accommodation, transportation, and payment procedures) prior to travel. High-standard hotels should be built near hospitals to accommodate both patients and accompanying family members, especially for post-treatment care. Lastly, some health tourism agencies should also extend their services beyond treatment to include comprehensive transportation arrangements. ^[19]

IX. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Iran has achieved a relatively favorable position within the global medical tourism sector; however, expanding this standing necessitates greater collaboration and sustained efforts. Iran possesses the potential to attract, on average, one million medical tourists annually, generating approximately \$7 billion in revenue. To realize this potential, key actions must be taken, including the facilitation of tourist arrivals, the establishment of high-quality medical centers, and the continuous monitoring of these facilities.

Considering the existing capabilities and untapped potential, the development of Iran's health tourism sector requires a more focused and systematic approach. This can be achieved through more effective investment, comprehensive long-term planning, and ensuring that the country's medical infrastructure, alongside the quality of accommodations and health tourism facilities, meets international standards. Such initiatives will provide a solid foundation for the further expansion of medical tourism, enhancing the sustainability of the sector in the future.

Despite its cost advantages compared to other countries, Iran's health tourism, specifically medical tourism, has not yet carved a distinct niche in the global market, primarily due to limitations in healthcare infrastructure and insufficient information regarding the country's medical capabilities. However, the sector is making initial strides toward growth. In this regard, strategic marketing and advertising efforts are crucial to attracting international patients. Organizing international exhibitions to showcase Iran's healthcare capabilities will also play a significant role in boosting the country's visibility as a medical tourism destination. Moreover, the application of information technology in facilitating communication between tourism agencies and healthcare providers, alongside improving access to medical information and enhancing communication with international patients (through continued market research and targeted marketing campaigns), can significantly contribute to attracting a larger number of medical tourists.

For a more dynamic and competitive tourism sector, it is imperative to address four key components: quantitative aspects of tourism (including payment systems in local currency, service duration, visa conditions, safety, and advertising), quality aspects (such as enhancing service

delivery, branding, and improving the overall visitor experience to attract medical tourists), tourism-related factors (including the expertise of medical professionals, travel logistics, and the availability of patient accommodations), and post-treatment tourism matters (such as the provision of follow-up care, remote consultations, and patient support post-return).

Furthermore, the government may consider introducing tariffs or taxes on supplementary tourism services to generate the necessary resources to reduce the cost of medical and preventive services for international tourists, thus increasing demand for health tourism and fostering economic growth in various regions of the country. Diplomatic efforts to strengthen relationships with neighboring and European countries should also focus on improving entry and exit procedures, extending visa durations, and consequently increasing the influx of foreign tourists.

To achieve further growth in the health tourism sector, it is critical that resources be allocated to the Ministry of Health to develop affordable, long-term healthcare facilities. The capabilities of healthcare and preventive services in different provinces should be systematically documented and made publicly available through international networks, particularly those serving English-speaking audiences.

Iran's medical tourism sector aligns with emerging global market trends, which are largely driven by neighboring countries, cultural proximity, and diaspora-based travel. In the current climate, prioritizing promotional activities directed at bordering nations and tailoring policies to their cultural and social preferences will prove more practical. Effective execution of these policies should be supported by a robust monitoring system and carried out through strategic government and micro-level planning. This review serves as a valuable resource for researchers examining the latest developments in Iran's medical tourism sector, offering useful insights for both governmental and private sector stakeholders.

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