

PRESCRIBING EGYPT

MEDICAL TOURISM INDUSTRY IS ON THE RISE

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Traveling thousands of miles from home in pursuit of high-quality, low-cost medical services – whether cosmetic, surgical, dental or therapeutic – is quickly burgeoning into a global trend. Known as medical tourism, or health travel, this practice is con-

necting the developed world with developing countries. An emerging and highly profitable market, medical tourism has grown substantially in countries such as India and China, and in Latin America. Of late, Egypt has become a preferred destination for health travel.

Besides the fact that Egypt now boasts a variety of high-quality and inexpensive medical services, it is becoming a competitive destination of choice for medical tourists thanks to its strategic location, and the availability of hard-to-find alternative treatments that utilize rare

resources abundant locally.

Egypt stands to gain tremendously from medical tourism thanks to a growing demand for inexpensive and readily available medical services. According to Dr. Helmy Tanahy, surgeon and owner of the Egypt-based assistance and medical tourism company Connex, medical tourism is currently a \$21 billion global industry, and will only continue to grow. In fact, Tanahy asserts that some estimate the industry will grow to \$3 trillion by 2020. According to a 2008 report by Deloitte Consulting, the number of US citizens who sought medical services abroad soared from 750,000 to 1.5 million between 2007 and 2008. Haytham Elmenshaw, chairman and managing director of Pinally, a touristic development company based in Cairo specializing in medical tourism, notes the potentially significant stake that Egypt can claim in this market: "Ultimately we decided to invest in this kind of tourism because it could work."

In today's world, life expectancy rates continue to climb, thanks in large part to advances in medicine and technology. Tanahy explains that "In Europe as a whole... 25 percent are above 60 years, and this population is on the increase. In the next 20 years, this figure will be higher because of better health care and technology advances. So we have more and more people who are needing knee and hip replacements and [other] procedures." Consequently, says Tanahy, Egypt stands to gain from the mounting medical needs of this demographic by offering affordable and quality healthcare without a waiting list.

Surgical, cosmetic and therapeutic services tend to be costly in the US, Europe and elsewhere in the developed world. According to Tanahy, the typical costs of cosmetic surgeries and other medical services in private UK hospitals are significantly higher than those in Egypt. For example, a hip replacement costs approximately \$100,000. The same

hip replacement can be performed in Egypt, by Egyptian physicians trained overseas, for anywhere between \$15,000 and \$17,000.

Dax Roque, an American who travels frequently between Egypt and the US, opted to get dental work done in Cairo because of the major price difference. "The total cost was LE 1,100 compared to \$500 [LE 2,900]. I was happy with the results and the experience," says Roque, who received the dental procedure in 2007 after others recommended that he do so in Egypt. "I would recommend all to seek out any medical or cosmetic treatment [in Egypt]," says Roque.

Additionally, Tanahy points out that medical procedures as part of a total health travel package – including recovery time post-procedure, accommodation, outings and round-trip airfare – cost medical tourists drastically less than what they would pay for the treatment alone at home. He claims that medical treatment in Egypt costs patients around half what they would pay for the same treatment in their home country. Connex is now partnering with a number of insurance companies in the US to facilitate the travel of patients seeking cheaper medical services in Egypt.

Egypt is also emerging as a primary destination for medical tourists because it can provide needed medical attention to health travelers from countries with over-burdened national healthcare systems. According to Tanahy, the Netherlands and the UK, for example, have excessively long waiting lists, which have become problematic for patients who require procedures such as urgent knee and heart-valve replacement. In contrast, Egypt can offer these patients the high-quality, low-cost procedures that they require without a long wait. As Dr. Kraus Limpert, a German orthopedic surgeon who works with Pinally to treat and administer both orthopedic and therapeutic services for medical tourists, remarks,

"Medical service is not something that you can do in a queue." He argues that medical staff in Europe and developed countries are visited by hundreds of patients a day, and cannot provide them with proper medical attention. On the other hand, says Limpert, venturing to Egypt allows health travelers to receive the treatment or services that they seek in a timely and attentive manner. "Here, there is the time to really see... what does [the patient] need?" Limpert argues. Furthermore, the comparatively low cost of medical services in Egypt affords medical tourists the possibility to receive treatment and then convalesce over a longer period of time.

Medical treatment in Egypt also provides patients with a distinct touristic experience. "It's a unique experience for them," says Elmenshaw. Egypt has the advantage of a rich history that attracts more tourists than any other Arab country. In fact, it has been estimated by the Ministry of Tourism that over 14 million tourists will visit Egypt annually by 2011. Companies such as Pinally and Connex combine the appeal of Egypt and the growing need for affordable medical services. "We try to match between the tourist [experience] and whatever your needs are..." says Elmenshaw.

Another indicator of Egypt's favorable potential in the market is its geographic accessibility. As Tanahy observes, tourists from the UK and the US – who tend to comprise the majority of individuals seeking treatment abroad – are traveling to places as far as India and China to receive treatment. Medical tourists can therefore benefit from Egypt's closer geographic proximity to their home countries, he says. Elmenshaw and Limpert also note that Egypt is central to eastern and western Europe and the Arab world. Accordingly, Limpert and Tanahy note that most patients come from neighboring countries, such as Libya, as well as eastern Europe,



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Russia, Spain and the Gulf region. Limpert and Tanahy's European patients tend to come especially for treatment of skin and joint conditions, such as psoriasis and arthritis, that have traditionally been sought in the Dead Sea. Egypt has a competitive advantage because it hosts natural resources similar to those that render the Dead Sea in Jordan and Israel so therapeutic, namely its salt-heavy waters, temperate climate and mineral-rich sands.

Though this market has yet to be fully capitalized upon, Egypt promises to be a major competitor among medical tourism destinations. "In the next two years it will change a lot. I'm getting the word out, attending more [health] conferences," Tanahy

explains, confident that "[the market] will grow."

However, both Elmanshawy and Tanahy point out that more needs to be done to market Egypt abroad. On the subject of the government's involvement to promote and market medical tourism, Tanahy says: "I know the ministries are talking about it, but physically I don't see anything being done."

The government is, however, taking some active steps to build Egypt's reputation as a destination for medical tourists. As Tanahy explains, "the Ministry of Health now has a kind of quality assurance or quality of service control." As a result, Egypt's health facilities and medical practitioners are increasingly gaining international accreditation

and trust. In fact, the well-known Dar Al Fouad Hospital in Cairo has recently been accredited by Joint Commission International, a non-profit organization specializing in improving the safety of patient care. Further efforts by the Ministry of Health, according to Tanahy, remain crucial for the long-term success of medical tourism in Egypt.

While Egypt has all of the tools to profit from this lucrative and growing market, its capacity for providing medical tourists with what they need, when they need, and at affordable costs, must be further promoted abroad according to industry professionals. "If you give this kind of industry support and advertising, yes, it can grow," says Elmanshawy. ■