

## **Decision Factors in Medical Tourism: Evidence from Burmese Visitors to a Hospital in Bangkok**

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**Abstract:** Medical tourism is a significant factor in Thailand's economy as the country aims to develop more high value-added activities to escape from the middle income trap. The country has a number of highly advanced private sector hospitals, with western-trained physicians and the legendary service levels provided in Thailand. There are several prime targets for promoting medical tourism, which include the Middle East and South Asia, as well as some western countries, but one which is often ignored is neighboring Myanmar. This country is emerging from military dictatorship and has an unequal society in which there are a number of wealthy individuals unable to find the level of medical service they require in their homeland. Many Burmese people speak English, which is the international language of tourism and medicine. For such people, Thailand is a logical destination in the search for high-quality medical tourism. However, little if any research has been conducted to determine the levels of satisfaction that patients and their carers have received in Thailand and what improvements in service would be required. This paper aims to fill that gap to some extent by reporting on a quantitative survey of 200 Burmese users of a well-known private sector hospital in Bangkok. Their levels of satisfaction are charted and this leads to discussion of the meaning of their visit and its overall impact and benefit.

**Keywords:** *Hospital management, medical tourism, Myanmar, Thailand*

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### **1. Introduction**

Tourism is a service industry which can generate income comparable to or more than other industries, especially for emerging economies. However, tourism can also be, if not properly controlled and maintained, a threat to the environment and also to the culture of a nation. Tourism is a human-oriented industry where the customer is at the centre of the tourism universe. The needs and wants of a customer play a very important role in promoting and gaining benefits from the tourism industry. Tourism destinations compete for customers on a global level and so will need high quality infrastructure to meet the needs of international visitors. Thailand has to a large extent already achieved this level of tourism development. According to Diithelm Travel (2006), the country's travel and tourism industry has contributed 6.7% (567 billion baht) to the GDP, as stated by the Tourism Satellite Accounting study by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). In the ten years since 1998, the number of international tourists coming to Thailand doubled and even though the average length of stay and average daily spending remained the same, overall revenue also more than doubled. Data for Myanmar residents visiting Thailand have only been available since 2001. The number of Myanmar tourists coming to Thailand has been very small compared to those from other countries; it rose from a mere 43,115 in 2001 to 75,183 in 2007, nearly doubling in size over that period, while a similar trend can be noted with Indian tourists. Average daily expenditure per person of Asian tourists was comparable to that of tourists from the more developed world and the amount of expenditure of the Burmese tourists is comparable to that of tourists from the United Kingdom. In this paper, Myanmar and Burma are used interchangeably. The main reason why medical tourism is becoming more popular in Asia, especially in the hubs of Singapore, Thailand and India, is the competitively lower prices with comparable standards to services from developed countries in the west. However, that reason does not always hold true for regional neighbors, where suitable services are not available in the home country and so a combined medical-pleasure tourism package across the border appears desirable. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2003), in 2002, the number of foreign patients seeking treatment in Thailand grew by 13% over the previous year with some 632,300 foreigners visiting 33 private hospitals.

**The Research Site:** The research site is a hospital accredited by the Joint Commission International (JCI), the international arm of the organization that reviews and accredits American hospitals. It has also been