



Factors attracting Indonesian medical tourists to Penang

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Abstract

This study sought to unpack factors attracting Indonesian medical tourists to Penang and employed a qualitative methodology in collecting information focusing only on Indonesian medical tourists. Semi-structure in-depth interviews were conducted on 25 participants who have had out-patient or in-patient medical treatment experience in private hospitals in Penang island. The interview findings revealed that effectiveness and accuracy of medical prescription and treatment was a major theme that enticed throngs of Indonesian medical tourists to the area. Apart from that, improved telecommunication and connectedness, affordable prices, a 'home away from home' and the reliable transportation system were the other themes which emerged and became apparent in making the burgeoning medical tourism industry sustainable in Penang.

Keywords: Medical tourism, Indonesia, health, interviews, Penang.

Introduction

Medical tourism is mixture of characteristics from medical care and tourism concept (Connell, 2006; Horowitz & Rosensweig, 2007). It is a set of activities in which a person travels long distances or across the border to avail medical services with direct or indirect engagement in leisure, business or other purposes (Jagyasi, 2008). Malaysia's medical tourism has been growing between 16% and 17% yearly over the years (2014-2018), outperforming the global medical tourism industry's average growth of between 10% and 12% (The Malaysian Reserve, 2019). In 2018, approximately 1.2 million tourists visited Malaysia for healthcare purpose - and this number is expected to increase (Lim, 2019). Furthermore, Penang is leading the medical tourism market in Malaysia in terms of recipients and revenues (Buletin Mutiara, 2018). Medical tourists from Indonesia accounted for up to 60% of the foreign patients in Penang (The Sun Daily, 2018). Based on the review of previous works on medical tourism in Malaysia, most of the works applied quantitative methods in gathering data. Recent studies focused on the factors affecting medical tourism destination selection in Malaysia as a whole without focusing on any particular state (Kumar & Hussian, 2016) as well as the service quality of Penang private hospitals (Nazem & Mohamed, 2016). As to date, there have been fairly limited studies done focusing only on the Indonesian medical tourists- one of the main countries that frequent Malaysia to seek medical treatment. Therefore, this qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of the factors that attract them to this state as it is crucial in making sure the sustainable growth of medical tourism industry in Penang.

Literature Review

Coming into the 21st Century, medical tourism is one of the businesses that is thriving around the world. This is due to medical technology advancement, travel made affordable as well as ease of information searching on the internet in the 4IR (Leahy, 2008). Medical tourism is



considered as one of the important components of the tourism industry that generates revenues for the country (Mohamad, Omar & Haron, 2013). In Malaysia, the medical tourism industry is expected to generate RM2.8 billion in medical tourism revenue in year 2020, with an estimated economic impact of RM10 billion (The Malaysian Reserve, 2019). Despite the stiff competition with other Asian countries such as Singapore, Thailand and India (Ganguli & Ahmed, 2016), the rising healthcare costs in neighbouring countries have helped Malaysia to achieve competitive advantage as the charges are more affordable comparatively (Lim, 2019). In addition to that, Malaysia has been recognised by the International Medical Travel Journal as the Health and Medical Tourism: Destination of the Year for three consecutive years from year 2015 to 2017 (Zakariah, 2018). Thailand, the leader in the field of medical tourism. It is amongst a group of nations, mainly in the developing, that offers relatively inexpensive treatment for foreigners (Nicolaidis & Zigiriadis, 2011)

This is without a doubt that Malaysian hospitals could offer both affordability and high quality medical care that meet the growing health needs of medical tourists. The sustainability of medical tourism industry in Malaysia is made possible with the public-private partnerships and marketing efforts (Chandran, Puteh, Zianuddin & Azmi, 2018). Unathi Sonwabile Henama (2014) argues that in order ensure shared growth, peripheral areas to urban centres that cater for the health tourists can take advantage from recuperation excursions by medical tourists before they fly back from their destination countries.

Penang has been identified as the leader in Malaysia's medical tourism market (Buletin Mutiara, 2018). The annual report from Penang Development Corporation (2018) claimed that the revenue generated from the medical tourists to Penang has accounted for almost 50% of health tourism market in Malaysia for year 2017. Report indicated that revenues for Penang private hospitals was totalling up to RM390 million in the year 2015 (Ian, 2018). Moreover, Penang has become the preferred medical tourism destination among Indonesians due to the fact that there is similarity with Indonesia in terms of weather, food, culture and language as well as direct flight connections from several Indonesian cities. Besides that, Report showed that hospitals that prioritise patient's convenience by offering same-day results for health screening and other clinical investigations even during weekends will generally receive overwhelming responses from Indonesian medical tourists (Lim 2019). Also, there is partnership with medical agents that assist Indonesians medical tourists in making appointments and travel arrangements which has also contributed to the influx of medical tourists (Lim, 2019).

In addition to that, other tourism stakeholders such as hotels, shopping malls as well as food and beverage establishments played important roles in satisfying the needs of Indonesian medical tourists and their family members. Family is one of the important dimension when a patient is travel for the purpose of medical tourism especially for Indonesians (Lim, 2019) as they could provide immediate advice and care for patients (Seeman, 2000). G Hotel Gurney and G Hotel Kelawai positioned themselves as post-treatment friendly hotel. This is due to the fact that these hotels are just nearby to shopping malls, eateries and hospitals that are convenient to both patients and family members to keep themselves entertained during the medical treatment period.

Medical tourists seek top quality treatment at the medical facilities they visit while overseas. They also need to know that they are legally covered when receiving care abroad and that their visits are kept confidential. This latter aspect is especially critical if the medical tourists are recognized global celebrities or political figures. They also need to feel comfortable with the practitioners they accept to treat their ailments and need to be convinced of the fact that the latest medical technology exists at their destination and will be used to assist their progression to better health. (Nicolaidis & Zigiriadis, 2011).



Furthermore, Straits Quay is one of the malls that has seen an increase in visitors, particularly those coming for medical treatment from Indonesia, China and Thailand due to its positioning as a hub for shopping and medical services such as speech therapy, fertility treatment, chiropractic care or relief for other related healthcare conditions (Lim, 2019). Considering all of these evidences, it seems that Penang is consistently upgrading with the state-of-the-art medical technologies and services as well as providing convenience in order to serve the medical tourists better.

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative methodology in collecting information focusing only on Indonesian medical tourists. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, is applied whereby the researcher can choose willing participants that will spend time meeting and answering the aim of researcher (Palys, 2008). It is convenient and flexible as the timing can be adjusted. Semi-structured, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted on 25 participants who have had out-patient or in-patient medical treatment experience in private hospitals in Penang island. In-depth interview was chosen as it involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation (Boyce and Neale, 2006). The semi-structured questions were related to their stay in Penang, how they choose their doctors and hospitals, feasibility of Penang as their medical provider and their intention for revisit Penang for medical purposes.

Due to some difficulties in obtaining consent from the hospitals, the interviews were conducted in various pharmacies located around Georgetown area. Official permission letters were provided to all the pharmacies requesting permission to interview available Indonesian customers. Once permission was granted, interviews were conducted in front of the pharmacy with the permission of the premises' owners and the respondents. All of the pharmacies provided chairs during interview sessions which lasted around 10-30 minutes. The study participants were chosen based on their availability and willingness to participate in the interview sessions. All of the interviews were conducted in Indonesian language and later translated into English. Some of the interviews were audio recorded with approval from the participants and transcribed verbatim. The data is organized and categorized into codes and themes, which thematic analysis is applied for further detailed analysis. The findings were then summarized using fishbone diagram. Fishbone diagram (the shape is similar to a fish skeleton) is a common tool used for a cause and effect analysis to identify a complex interplay of causes for a specific problem or event (Ishikawa, 1990).

Results and Discussion

There were 25 participants interviewed in this study with their age ranging between 35 to 70 years old. More than half of them were from Medan (64%), followed by Jakarta (20%), Surabaya (8%), Bandung (4%) and Manado (4%). About 92 percent of them have been to Penang for medical treatment of various ailments more than three times in five consecutive years. All of them were accompanied by their spouse or family members during their visit to Penang. Based on the findings, five major themes were derived from the interview responses and analyzed as follows:

Effectiveness and accuracy of medical prescription and treatment

The major reason that attracted Indonesian medical tourists to seek medical assistance away from their home was the effectiveness and accuracy of medical prescription given by the doctors in Penang private hospitals. A total of 60 percent of the participants revealed that they were misdiagnosed previously in their hometown hospitals. This gradually made them lose confidence in the medical services offered by their local hospitals and seek better services abroad.



I had a bad experience in my hometown Manado. The doctors there diagnosed me with cancer and told me it was an early stage cancer therefore I needed to undergo a few treatments. The next thing the doctor came back to me and told me about my cancer being in the third stage and I have to transfer to another hospital. However, the hospital doesn't have the needed facilities (Respondent 12).

I was diagnosed with Hepatitis and doctor told me I had a 50/50 chance to live. Then, I opted for a second opinion in Penang. With only a few medical visitations, I recovered fully (Respondent 10).

The participants also claimed that Penang doctors were far more experienced and were much better at diagnosing patients ailments. They were friendly and made the patients feel better as the information provided through consultation is much clearer and can be easily understood.

The doctors are always friendly and always share the best solution with us. The information was clear and direct to the point. They also are frank and share ways on how to save money (Respondent 4)

Apart from that, the participants also claimed that Penang private hospitals are much more capable, organized and provide faster services compared to their local hospitals back home. Two of the interviewees stated that a simple blood test takes up to three to four days just to get the result back in their hometown, while in Penang the patient can collect it within a day with details clearly explained.

Affordable price

All of the participants revealed that the cost is much cheaper in terms of consultation, surgery, operations and also medicine. According to them, in comparison to the cost of treatment in Medan, Jakarta and Singapore, Penang is the lowest and most affordable. Out of the total participants, five mentioned that they had previously sought treatment in Singapore before. However, due to the lower prices in Penang, they switched and came here regularly for check-ups or even for follow up treatments.

The prices for my chemotherapy and also the facilities charges are cheaper compared to in Jakarta (Respondent 1).

For the same service I'm getting here in Penang is at least half the price in my hometown, Medan (Respondent 7).

Apart from that, the participants claimed that the prices of goods and services in Penang is much cheaper as for the currency exchange rate. This enable them to enjoy shopping (most frequented mall is Gurney Plaza) and visit other attractions in Penang such as Penang Hill before departing home after their medical check-up or appointment. They further revealed that accommodation here is also easily available and the price is reasonable.

Home Away from Home

Most of the participants revealed that they are as comfortable as they would be in their own abode. Doctors and nurses in hospitals can speak the Indonesian language or are able to converse in Bahasa Melayu which is similar to their mother tongue. In comparison with others who have been to other countries to seek treatment, language was a big barrier and made it hard for them to express themselves in describing the nature of their illness. Therefore, staying in Penang made them feel connected and attuned with the culture here.

I am very surprised that the doctors here can understand our language and we need not speak in English. We are able to communicate easily and makes us feel welcome and at home. In fact, the doctors are also friendly and show that they care towards us (Respondent 11, 21 and 25).



Another reason that makes the participants keep coming regularly (80 percent will come yearly) for medical check-ups is the good and tasty food. Penang food is considered cheap and it is easily available. In fact, most of the food sellers they frequented were Indonesian stalls, located around Georgetown.

Strong kinship and fellow support groups

Strong kinship amongst Indonesians is another factor that makes them feel at home. Two participants revealed that relatives staying and working in Penang helped them to arrange a medical appointment, book accommodation, provide healthy meals and act as chauffeur or tour guide. In fact, some Indonesians staying here even turned this into a small business opportunity where they provided these services to their fellow Indonesian medical tourists.

I will just give a call to a friend. He will do everything for me. We are like brothers. He helped me a lot... I will pay him for his good efforts. As a gift. If I were to come here on my own, I would not know what to do. He knows everything. In fact, he knows all the doctors as well... (Respondent 3)

Improved telecommunication and connectedness

The interview findings revealed that improved telecommunication and connectedness has greatly assist in choosing Penang as a medical provider of choice. Telco companies in Penang provides stable and wide WiFi coverage throughout the state. With their smartphones, it becomes easy in making hospital appointments, booking accommodation, buying flight tickets and getting to places in Penang easily accessible and hassle free.

I can call (using smartphone) to make hospital appointment from my house in Indonesia. It is very easy.... I am not very good with handphones.... Usually my son is the one to help me book air tickets from AirAsia or Marlindo Air, it is affordable and fast... When I arrive here, we have relatives to pick us up. We pay him and he also helped us to find accommodation. (Respondent 22)

Majority of the participants affirmed that improved technology has helped them to come to Penang. However, two participants lamented that they did not download any mobile transportation application and would prefer to use a taxi instead.

I usually use taxi to go to places in Penang. I have an Indonesian app (application) which is like Uber but only available in Indonesia. Penang I think use Grab but I didn't install the applications.... I just come here for a short while and I buy pre-paid as it is cheap and can make me browse. (Respondent 2)

Reliable Transportation System

Transportation is the most important element when travelling to a different country. Thus 96 percent of the participants agreed that the public transportation system in Penang is good and generally reliable. The most common mode of transportation for them is e-hailing services such as GRAB and taxi. However, none of the participants have used RAPID buses as they lamented that they would prefer to commute via cars which are far more comfortable compared to riding on crowded buses. Other reasons for not using public buses is due to their health condition. Most of the time, the participants with certain medical conditions could not endure standing for long periods of time. Furthermore, to catch a bus, they would need to walk a bit more to get to the bus stop.

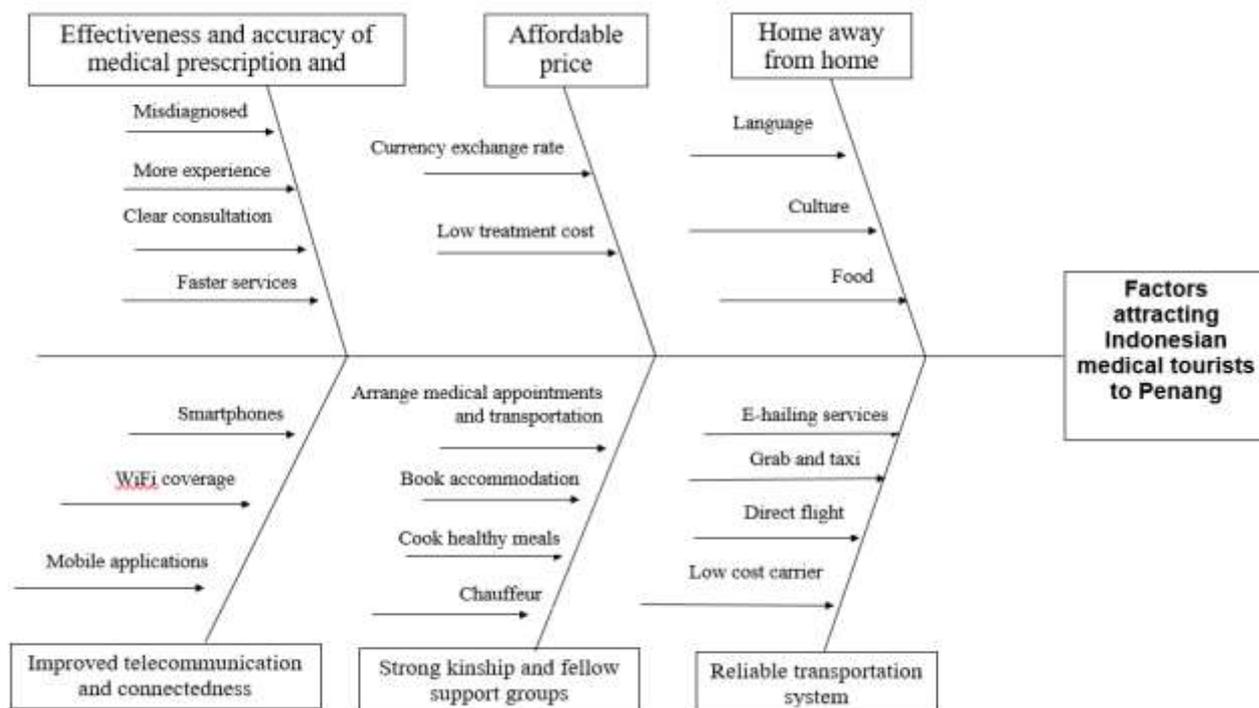
Usually I will use taxi as it is very easy to get them. They are almost everywhere and they would recognize us (tourists)... it depends sometime, I will use taxi, sometime I will use GRAB. I will not use bus because I need to wait. My condition does not allow me to stand too long. See my foot is a bit swollen. So, I prefer to ride a car instead (Respondent 41)

At the hospital, the taxi station is always filled with taxi driver, therefore I will just walk there and take a taxi to go where I want to go (Respondent 6).

Taxi can send me straight to my motel's doorstep. It is easier and very pleasant (Respondent 18, 19 and 24).

Apart from that, the participants revealed that with cheaper air tickets, direct flight connectivity from destinations such as Medan, increases the number of Indonesian medical tourists to Penang.

The six emerged themes from this study are summarized into the fishbone diagram below:



Discussion

Positive feedback towards the doctors and the services in a hospital will usually tend to result in frequent return. According to Murphy (2007), it is stated that doctors and nurses in Malaysia are well-qualified and trained, with most having experience or attained degree from foreign countries such as India, Scotland and also United Kingdom (Lee, 2007). Thus, the treatment is usually handled more professionally which leads to an efficient treatment happening. The ratio of a patient to nurse is also high in private hospitals leading to faster service with good experiences had by patients (Nazeem & Mohamed, 2015). Even though, there are many countries in Asia where the medical tourism takes center stage such as Thailand, Taiwan and Singapore, Malaysia tops the heart of Indonesian care as the price is considered reasonable (World Health Organisation, 2015). A lower price increases valuation when consumers consider creation cost, the higher the price it will decrease the valuation (Deval et al., 2013). This can be linked to the cost of treatment in Penang whereby it is cheaper compared to hospitals in Indonesia. In another study, the high cost of treatment in Indonesia may force patients to look for reasonable options for the same service elsewhere (Hall, 2012).

Geographically, Penang and Sumatera, Indonesia are only 520km apart. Once sharing the same Sunda Plate, these neighbouring countries share many similarities between them. The most similar to Bahasa Malaysia is Bahasa Indonesia (Phillips, 1973). Based on the findings,



language plays an important factor in attracting Indonesian people to seek medical treatment in Penang. It makes their travel much easier while they can converse with doctors about their symptoms more fluently. Apart from that, Hokkien is also another language which most Chinese Indonesian can converse in, very much similar to Penang. Thus, this makes conversation much easier and the patients can explain their symptom more effectively. Excellent food usually makes us feel like home. Finding food catering for Indonesian taste buds is no problem as according to Raji et al. (2017) Indonesian cuisine has long been influencing Malaysian kitchen through migration.

Word of mouth is a very reliable source of information especially for a destination selection. As stated in Murray (1991), patients prefer to get information about medical treatment from family and friends rather than from often dubious sponsored promotional sources. This applies to the medical scene here in Penang as they revealed that would prefer to believe information coming from family and friends. Friends and family are said to be the living image-formation agent because trust has been long built between them (Murphy, 2007). Strong kinship or brotherhood can be understood as a bond shared by men of various backgrounds centered on common experiences, traditions and/or identities (Laing & Villavicencio, 2016). In this case, Indonesians in Malaysia tend to provide help to each other and at the same time generate income to support their living.

Ride hailing applications has been successful in many parts of the world as it is well known for its comfort, convenience, safety and cost (Alemi, Circella, Handy & Mokhtarian, 2018). With the improved technology and connectedness, booking a ride hailing is much easier for Indonesian tourists, contributing to the rapid growth in this medical industry. Another important factor is the fast growing low-cost carriers that provide direct and affordable air flight tickets. Furthermore, these low-cost carriers also offer attractive promotions such as price reduction for medical treatments and pick-up service from the airport by the hospital ("Citilink offers benefits for medical tourism to Penang", 2018). Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) also played an important role attracting medical tourists by collaborating with AirAsia to offer benefits and discounts at participating hospitals and selected F&B outlets. These promotions and partnerships has further encouraged and strengthened Penang potential to cater to Indonesian healthcare travelers.

Conclusion

This explanatory study provides an understanding of the factors that influenced Indonesian medical tourists in selecting their medical destination. As the medical tourism sector highly contributes to the economy, the Malaysian government and Penang state government could utilize the data collected from this study for better future policy development and the enhanced sustainability of the growing and important medical tourism industry.

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