

**FACTORS AFFECTING THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF  
THAILAND MEDICAL TOURISM, POISED TO BE  
A TOP OF MIND MEDICAL DESTINATION**



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## **FACTORS AFFECTING THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF THAILAND MEDICAL TOURISM, POISED TO BE A TOP OF MIND MEDICAL DESTINATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Globalization enables people to travel across the globe to access medical care services wherever convenient. Thailand is one of the most renowned medical tourism destinations in the world where comprehensive range of medical therapies are offered by public and private hospitals. Despite the competitive environment among the industry rivals e.g. Singapore, Malaysia and India, therefore, what would be the factors affecting the attractiveness of Thailand medical tourism, poised to be top of mind medical destination.

The research utilized the qualitative approach using the in-depth interview. The interview was conducted at various private hospitals in Bangkok metropolitan area with 15 local and internationals respondents who are the patient themselves and executives who engaged in medical tourism promotion.

The study revealed that “Physician Training” was considered as the most attractive factor when making decision for medical treatment purpose. Cost effectiveness is less involved in the decision making process when dealing with life and death. Therefore, industry partners should be more specific on the medical travellers’ primary concerns to compete in the emerging global medical tourism industry.

**KEY WORDS:** Medical Tourism / Healthcare / Hospital / Thailand

31 pages

## CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Research Question	2
1.2 Research Objectives	2
1.3 Research Scope	3
1.4 Expected Benefit	3
<b>CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 History of Medical Tourism	5
2.2 Determinants of Medical Tourism Destinations	6
2.2.1 Cost Effectiveness	7
2.2.2 JCI Accredited Hospitals/Infrastructure	8
2.2.3 Quality of Care	9
2.2.4 Physician Training	9
2.2.5 Holistic & Alternative Treatment	10
2.2.6 Supportive Regulations	10
2.2.7 Pre-Post Medication Rehabilitation Opportunity	10
2.2.8 Quality of Facilities	11
2.2.9 Thai Hospitality	11
2.2.10 Fast Medical Attention	11
<b>CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 Research design	13
3.2 Population and Sampling	14
3.3 Data collection	14
3.4 Data analysis	15

## CONTENTS (cont.)

	<b>Page</b>
<b>CHAPTER IV FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION</b>	<b>17</b>
4.1 Demographic profiles of respondents	17
4.2 Research Findings	19
4.2.1 Physicians Training	20
4.2.2 Quality of Care	21
4.2.3 Quality of Facilities and JCI accredited hospitals/ infrastructure	21
4.2.4 Fast Medical Attention	22
<b>CHAPTER V RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>24</b>
5.1 Practical Implications	24
5.2 Limitations of the study & Recommendations for future research	24
5.2.1 Future Research Recommendations	25
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>29</b>
Appendix A: The interview guide	30
<b>BIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>31</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table</b>		<b>Page</b>
1.1	Top 14 Medical Tourist Destinations (2014)	2
2.1	Average Medical Cost Comparison in 2014	7
4.1	Descriptive Statistics of Gender	17
4.2	Descriptive Statistics of Age	18
4.3	Descriptive Statistics of Country of Residence	18
4.4	Descriptive Statistics of Frequency of Visit	19



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1 Research framework of how choice of location and facility influence customer or patient to choose Thailand as their medical destination	12





## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The walled-down world or the so-called "globalization", is an emerging of ideas across the globe, the exchange of culture and values that have brought individuals together than at any other time in recent years with innovation headways. Customers of goods and services in all nations are those who benefit from an exchange for reasons that incorporate expanded rivalry, competitive advantage, economies of scale and access to more noteworthy range of products and services.

Individuals who seek for medical cares have also benefited by this contracted world as it permits them to adventure therapeutic consideration at reasonable cost anywhere in the world and it has brought the term medicinal tourism.

Medical tourism, in general, it can be defined as the process of traveling outside of residence for the purpose of receiving medical care (Dr. Tomislav Meštrović, MD, Ph.D., 2014). Combining the word "tourism" in medicinal tourism, is the idea that individuals frequently stay in the foreign country after received a medical treatment, in which travelers can exploit their visit by having a journey, excursion or participating in some other conventional tourism activities. Medical tourism trends are reflecting both subjective and quantitative movements in patient mobility, as individuals go from wealthier to less developed nations with a specific goal to get to more financially benefits, the accessibility of modest flights and convenience among their visits.

**Statement of the Problem:** Nowadays, people are embracing the idea of medical tourism as would be prudent alternatives for health care services done in several developed nations. A rising number of medical patients are in search for country destinations, where hospitals or holistic health care centers offer high-quality service at a more affordable cost. Countries Hungary, India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, are some of the few popular medical tourist destinations that offer inexpensive medical procedures. Thailand is ranked as the top of medical tourist destination according to the ranking of top 14 medical tourism destinations by volume of care by Forbes (Reenita Das, 2014).

**Table 1.1 Top 14 Medical Tourist Destinations (2014)**

<b>Top 14 Medical Tourist Destinations by Volume of Care</b>	
1 - Thailand	8 – Costa Rica
2 - Hungary	9 - Brazil
3 - India	10 – Mexico
4 - Singapore	11 – South Korea
5 - Malaysia	12 – Colombia
6 - Philippines	13 – Belgium
7 – United States	14 - Turkey

Health travelers who chose Thailand for their medical destination often took advantage of planning a vacation tour or excursion while they are visiting the country. After medical treatment procedure, medical travelers usually plan their trip to enjoy a relaxing holiday in Thailand while exploring the country's several beautiful beaches. Not to mention about local cuisines and Thai culture that they seek to experience.

As a rapid growth of world medical tourism progresses, there are risks involved in the decision-making process of medical travelers that influence patients to plan their trip to visit Thailand for such purposes.

### **1.1 Research Question**

What is the influencing factors affecting customers' or patients' preference of hospital in Thailand as a top-of-mind medical tourism destination?

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

The objective of this research is to study the influencing factors affecting the attractiveness of Thailand that leads international medical tourist to choose the hospital or holistic medical centers in Thailand as their medical tourism destination.

### **1.3 Research Scope**

This research study is primarily focused on medical travelers, who travel outside of their home country to receive medical treatments at hospitals or holistic health care centers in Thailand. The interviews were conducted with international patients who came for medical treatment at Joint Commission International (JCI) accredited hospitals in Thailand e.g. Bangkok Dusit Medical Services (BDMS) and its affiliations Samitivej Sukhumvit Hospital and BNH Hospital. The service providers are also interviewed to reflect ideas of their competitive strategy to attract medical tourists. The researcher focused on determining the influencing factors affecting the motivation of international medical travelers to come to the hospitals as mentioned earlier in Thailand for medical treatment purposes.

### **1.4 Expected Benefit**

The renowned tourism destinations in Thailand has held the crown of one most popular holiday destinations in Asia, and better yet, that also emerged health tourism sector that expected to generate earning in excess of BT100bn (\$3bn) in 2015, from income earned by private hospitals listed on Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET), (Oxfordbusinessgroup, 2015). Thailand over the past decade has developed medical tourism industry; private hospitals have invested vastly in top-notch facilities to achieve service excellence and optimize customers' or patients' experience. Medical practitioners are internationally certified, the reinforcement of Continuing Medical Education (CME) accreditation program required by The Medical Council of Thailand which primarily aims to develop the education point collecting system to comply with all the medical regulations (Medical Council of Thailand, 2007). Therefore, medical practitioners are capable of accommodating patients of all nationality without communication barriers in which offering quality at far less cost than in developed countries. Consequently, the results and findings of this research study will be helpful to hospitals in Thailand, whereby they can have a clear comprehension on what medical tourists value the most, and what they are searching for when they come to Thailand for medical treatments. Aside from internal influencing factors, this study will help to recognize the essential external key strengths that influences decision-making process pertaining medical

destination selection for effectively implement marketing strategy that inspire universal patients looking for medicinal medications to pick clinics in Thailand as their primary destination for social insurance.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 History of Medical Tourism**

In the early stage, medical tourism is commonly known as medical travel or health tourism. It is used by mass media to describe the characteristic of patients traveling across broader to obtain health care services purposes (Shaywitz, DA and Ausiello, DA, 2002). According to Deloitte Center for Health Solutions (2008), Medical Tourism is to describe the process of traveling out of a home country for treatments and care abroad or domestically. In some cases, medical tourism often includes a leisure vacation during the visit in the country destination chosen for medical treatment.

People have been traveling for centuries to obtain health care, from ancient Greeks and Egyptians who gathered to hot springs and baths, to 18th and 19th century Europeans and Americans who traveled to spas and remote retreats wanting to cure an illness like tuberculosis. But surgery abroad is still a modern trend. As health care services costs ascended in the 1980s and 1990s, patients start searching for moderate alternatives health care destinations. According to Time, 2008, the so-called "tooth tourism" grew quickly, with Americans traveling to Central American nations like Costa Rica for dental bridges and caps not covered by their insurance. (A substantial rate of today's medicinal tourism is for dental work, as much as 40% by some estimates.) Many U.S. doctors and dentists were amazed at the idea of their patients swinging to foreign hospitals for health care that they considered more cost effective. While many U.S. medical professionals perceived it as taking a risk, countries like Cuba perceived it as opportunities.

After Thailand's currency collapsed in 1997, Thailand Tourism Authority launched a campaign to boost its economy by making Thailand be top of mind destination for plastic surgery, hoping to hike up the revenues. Thailand successfully became the target country for comparatively inexpensive sex-change operations, where the cost is much lower, as well as the requirements for pre-surgery psychological counseling, is more

flexible. Thailand is now a destination for all types of plastic surgery as well as an avenue for general medical procedures. One of the Thailand's best-known hospitals is Bumrungrad International Hospital, the venue for medical tourists where patients from over 190 countries come to receive medical treatment, with the international patient center with multilingual interpreters, and an airline ticket counter.

The American Medical Association (AMA) introduced a set of guidelines for medical tourism that advocates companies, employers and other parties involved in the medical tourism field provide proper follow-up care, legal consultancy, recommend to use only accredited facilities, and inform patients of the potential risks of engaging surgical procedures with long flights and vacation activities aside of other recommendations, (American Society of Registered Nurses, 2009).

Joint Commission International (JCI), a non-profit organization that certifies the safety and record of hospitals. According to Health-tourism.com, in 1997, JCI was formed to check and investigate international healthcare facilities to conform international standards due to the emergence of health providers around the world. Consequently, countries like India, Singapore and Thailand became legitimate medical tourism destinations due to JCI accreditation. Based on an article in Health-tourism.com, medical tourism continued its massive growth with as many as 150,000 US Citizens traveling to destinations in Asia and Latin America in 2006. Worldwide medical tourists continue to travel abroad to get medical treatment overseas due to the economic savings advantage. Currently, several international patients combine their medical treatment with a relaxing holiday vacation. As globalization in healthcare market continues to grow, the medical tourism trend is set to be a booming industry.

## **2.2 Determinants of Medical Tourism Destinations**

- 1) Cost Effectiveness
- 2) JCI Accredited Hospitals/Infrastructure
- 3) Quality of Care
- 4) Physician Training
- 5) Holistic & Alternative Treatment
- 6) Supportive Regulations

- 7) Pre-Post Medication Rehabilitation Opportunity
- 8) Quality of Facilities
- 9) Thai Hospitality
- 10) Fast Medical Attention

### 2.2.1 Cost Effectiveness

**Table 2.1 Average Medical Cost Comparison in 2014 (SHS Web of Conferences 12, (2014))**

Average Medical Cost Comparison (in USD)					
Treatment	United States	Malaysia	Thailand	Singapore	India
Heart Bypass (CABG)	136,000	14,000	13,000	23,000	7,000
Angioplasty	57,000	8,750	3,800	27,750	3,300
Knee Replacement	45,000	10,900	11,400	16,700	6,800
Gastric Bypass	33,000	8,600	16,700	20,000	5,500

One of the key determinants to choose medical treatment in foreign countries is the cost. According to Table 2, the cost of medical treatment in Thailand is lower than in the United States, Singapore, and Malaysia. While the average medical cost in India being the lowest. However, Thailand is still being the leader in the market regarding the high quality of service/treatment and affordable cost. To be more understanding regarding the average cost among those countries, there are some reasons supporting as following.

Malaysia, there was news pertaining the safety of National Airline; for example, airplane crash, and hijack, which makes their country looks non-secured and instability. Also, they still lack advanced technologies and specialized treatment (BBC NEWS, 2015).

India, as offers the lowest medical cost among Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore, but most Indian hospitals are also losing confidence from the foreign patients. The hospitals have observed poor of hygiene awareness in medical attendants, unhygienic food preparation, lack of proper hospitality services, and unstandardized pricing of services and no industry standards (Dr. Suman Kumar Dawn, 2011).

Singapore is known as one of the richest countries in the world, and possible this may entice medical tourists with more reliable medical services. However, their government does not emphasize on promoting much on medical tourism campaign (Chantal Herberholz and Siripen Supakankunti, 2013).

### **2.2.2 JCI Accredited Hospitals/Infrastructure**

The Joint Commission International (JCI) is a United States-based association in which its objective is to elevate health care delivery standards through evaluation and accreditation of healthcare hospitals and organizations. Therefore, accredited hospitals with state-of-the-art medical facilities and technologies as well as the availability of US-trained, board certified medical professionals and surgeons overseas have added more credibility to the medical tourism trend.

Accreditation standards are a vital factor when evaluating the quality of care provided by a foreign hospital facilities, Smits, P., Champagne, F., Contandriopoulos, D., Sicotte, C. and Preval, J. (2008). The primary accrediting body in health care within the United States is the Joint Commission International (JCI). Medical tourists often rely on hospital to provide a standard of care that equals or exceeds in the western country. Hence, the JCI evaluates and accredits health care organizations around the world, which aims to improve safety and quality of care in an international standard. Hospitals in Thailand take pride on providing a high-quality standard of healthcare services. Thailand was the first country in Asia to achieve JCI accreditation in 2002 (Allaboutmemakeovers, 2015).

The JCI accreditation aims to improve continuously the safety and quality of care in an international standard. Currently, there are 18 hospitals in Thailand that are accredited by the JCI. According to health-tourism (2015), the following is the up to date list of the hospitals that are JCI accredited

- 1) Bangkok Hospital Pattaya
- 2) Yanhee Hospital
- 3) Bumrungrad Hospital
- 4) Chiangmai Ram Hospital
- 5) Bangkok Hospital
- 6) Ramkhamhaeng Hospital



- 7) Vejthani Hospital
- 8) BNH Hospital
- 9.) Chaophya Hospital
- 10) Bangkok Hospital Phuket
- 11) Bangkok Hospital Samui
- 12) Synphaet Hospital
- 13) Praram 9 Hospital
- 14) Nonthavej Hospital
- 15) Samitivej Srinakarin Hospital
- 16) Samitivej Sriracha Hospital
- 17) Samitivej Sukhumvit Hospital
- 18) Sikarin Hospital

### **2.2.3 Quality of Care**

Some other issues of quality of care are also important before choosing a medical facility abroad. A patient would prefer to seek treatment from a facility that contributes to reducing the likelihood of contracting a serious disease during the procedure or during follow-up treatment in the country. Thailand's medical service offers a wide range of specialized treatments such as cardiovascular, cosmetic or plastic surgery, dental care, gender reassignment, general surgery, orthopedics and , and orthopedics. Well-trained medical staffs and specialists with high technology for treatments are important that medical tourists also consider standard and quality of medical treatments. Even though, the equivalent competency of medical technology and facilities, the difference is dependent on the cost of labor. The affordable range of medical treatments draws numbers of international patients to the country, provided with the growing global awareness on healthcare (Jutamas Rerkrujipimol and Ilian Assenov, 2011)

### **2.2.4 Physician Training**

The high medical innovation and training that is provided to the medical practitioners is adapted and accepted globally. With a high proportion of medicinal tourism, Thailand offers the latest and safe procedures performed by a certified staff only. The board certified and internationally trained physicians who are able to speak

in English typically appeal to several international patients. One of the most famous hospitals, Bumrungrad International Hospital, which is the top facility for global medical tourists, advertises that over 200 of its doctors are board certified in the United States. These are the important aspects of the medical doctors that contribute to the choice of facilities to several medical tourists around the globe (Smith and Forgione, 2008).

### **2.2.5 Holistic & Alternative Treatment**

Thailand offers the most comprehensive range of medical services and facilities for Beauty, Health, Wellness and Spa with excellent service to serve the needs of patients. The services are supervised by medical professionals with medical licenses in modern medicine, Thai traditional medicine, Thai applied medicine, Chinese medicine, natural medicine, and many more (Thailandmedtourism, 2015).

### **2.2.6 Supportive Regulations**

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) grants non – immigrant visa on arrival for medical reasons, which gives them 90 days and requires proof that they are receiving treatment from a licensed medical facility. The medical healthcare providers are private organization relying on non- government services of income from international patient or tourists. Therefore, restriction on such tourists is minimized. Such visas are easiest and least restrictive to obtain for entry into most countries. Like other recreational tourist, medical tourists also pay for health care treatment. Many countries in the world support and encourage the medical tourist (Scholarsworld, 2014).

### **2.2.7 Pre-Post Medication Rehabilitation Opportunity**

Thailand has numerous vacation destinations that have drawn tourists from all over the world. Its warm climate, ease accessibility of infrastructure, Thai food and exotic islands and beaches are always a fascination for vacationers from Europe, US, and Australia particularly. It is likewise a regional air logistic hub in the South Asian region with international flights available on a daily basis. Thailand has developed enough to provide most comforts yet still wild enough to offer as once-in-a-lifetime travel experiences (Thaimedicaladvisor, 2012).

### **2.2.8 Quality of Facilities**

Private leading hospitals in Thailand are reliable on a high quality of service and highly qualified doctors. However, to attract more foreign patients, investing in medical equipment is also important. Improving facilities can be done by changing architecture and interior design of hospital; creating pleasant, cozy atmosphere, through the decor; by emphasizing noninvasive treatments, minimizing suffering through the use of advanced equipment and treatment techniques (Erik Cohen, 2008).

### **2.2.9 Thai Hospitality**

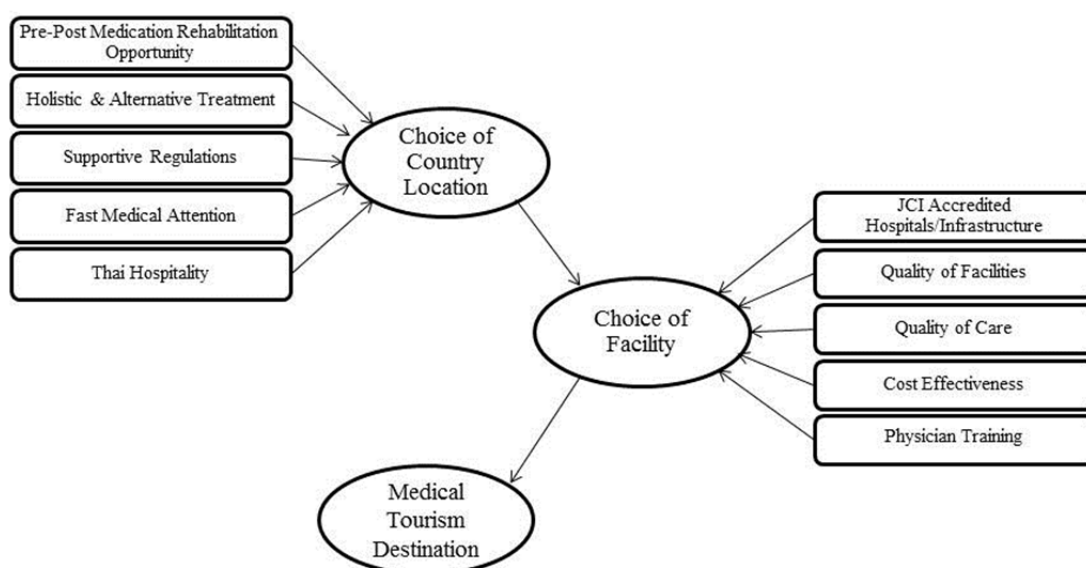
Thailand is one of leading medical tourism country that has a great reputation of a unique culture and Thai hospitality characteristics, which are different and difficult to find in other countries. The quality of Thai hospitality is key differentiating factors to medical tourism. Providing a high quality of services to customers is part of the Thai culture that comprise of friendliness, caring nature and gentle ways of the Thai people (Monica, Yu-Feng, Koichi, Vijak, 2006). The friendliness of Thai people and culture make visitors feel more comfortable, relax, safe and at home in Thailand.

### **2.2.10 Fast Medical Attention**

Due to the rising costs of medical treatments in the United States, it urges the willingness of patients to seek private care in the countries with the government-run system to avoid waits, in which increase motivation for medical tourism (Patsner, 2008). According to the study by Bruce Patsner, M.D., J.D. 2008, Health care programs in some of the countries like the United Kingdom or Canada, patients may have to be on waiting lists more than a year for surgery (Runckel, 2007). Therefore, patients would like to look for medical care abroad for a prompt response to their urgency.

In accordance with the aforementioned key determinants, more research in the medical tourism context is necessary for better understanding on the industry that can be developed further. Connell (2013), argued that more analysis is required for studying medical tourist behavior and its impact on the destinations' social and economics. The more understanding of the factors affecting the attractiveness of Thailand medical tourism, the better that industry partners can implement a competitive strategy to influence customers or medical tourists to come to Thailand, in which contribute to the country's

GDP as a whole. However, the examination of the main factors that contributes to the success of the industry has been studied mainly on the patients' point of view rather than the service providers' aspect, which remains limited. Therefore, the research framework is designed to investigate the influencing factors affecting the attractiveness of Thailand that leads international medical tourist to choose the hospital or holistic medical centers in Thailand as their medical tourism destination, reflecting customers or patients' and service providers' point of view.



**Figure 2.1** Research framework of how choice of location and facility influence customer or patient to choose Thailand as their medical destination (Smith, P. and Forgione, D., 2008)

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research design**

The primary purpose of this chapter is to explain the procedures conducted in determining the essential factors. The research used in this paper is qualitative design approach which seeks to understand customer or patient behavior and reasons that influence their decision-making process to choose the destination to receive medical treatments. According to Martyn Shuttleworth (Sep 14, 2008), qualitative techniques are vial when a research subject is too complex to be answered by a simple yes or no hypothesis. The result of this research method is not dependent on sample size as referring to quantitative approach, yet can generate meaningful results with a small sample group.

This qualitative research employed semi-structured interviews to explore the factors that influence decision-making process to choose Thailand as a prime destination for medical treatments. The interviews took place at healthcare service providers (Bangkok hospital and affiliations) due the high number of international patients received medical treatments and it its reputation and aggressive expansion plans to serve patients with international standard.

With this particular research method, it allows researcher and participants to develop a good relationship in which in-depth interview will be used to conduct research in a less formal regimen. Participants of this sample group would have an opportunity to respond and contribute to greater details than it is typically done with quantitative technique, and it allows researcher to explore alternative questions, aside of structured questions, depending on participants' experience and contribution during the interview.

## 3.2 Population and Sampling

Reassurance of this research is to recruit the most creditable sample by maximizing variations of sample size. Therefore, the interviews included a total of 15 respondents that were selected through purposive sampling, based on researchers' experience in the area. Criteria for inclusion in the interview list included: 10 of 15 respondents were international patients representing Western and Asian countries who received medical treatments at Bangkok Hospital and its affiliation. There were 5 of 15 respondents of executive populations who work for international marketing department, of which included medical practitioners who engaged in medical treatment activities to provide first-hand experience for the researcher.

## 3.3 Data collection

The research questions were designed to explore, narrow down and identify the key influencing factors for choosing Thailand as the destination for health care services. In-depth interview and conversational technique were adopted as the primary data collection approach allowing the researcher to appropriately monitor conversation and gather information during the interview.

The interview topics included individuals' data mining: personal histories, perspectives, and experiences. Questions related to factors that influence their decision making to choose Thailand as their final destination to receive healthcare services that also combined source of information the respondents sought for, the tendency for their next trip and overall satisfaction.

A list of open-ended questions was developed to use as a tool to help respondents providing opinions toward the questions. With open-ended questions, respondents are free to respond in their words, and these responses tend to be more descriptive than simply "yes" or "no" (Dentin et al., 2000)

Some example of the semi-structured interview questions are provided below:

1) Have you ever been to any other country for healthcare purposes, if yes, please indicate country and reason?

2) What are the sources of information that help you make a decision in choosing the medical treatment destination?

3) What is your primary concern regarding the choice of country for medical treatment purpose?

4) What are your short-listed countries before your final decision?

5) What are your influencing factors or criteria to choose Thailand as your prime destination?

6) What is your expectation toward country's destination?

7) What are top three most relevant factors that helped you choose Thailand as your medical treatment destination? And what are other relevant factors you considered?

7.1) Cost Effectiveness

7.2) JCI Accredited Hospitals/Infrastructure

7.3) Quality of Care

7.4) Physician Training

7.5) Holistic & Alternative Treatment

7.6) Supportive Regulations

7.7) Pre-Post Medication Rehabilitation Opportunity

7.8) Quality of Facilities

7.9) Thai Hospitality

7.10) Fast Medical Attention

To better understand the characteristics of interview respondents, demographic of participants were also captured, emphasizing on age, gender and nationality to help researcher categorizes information as the answers can be varied from one to another.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The analysis of qualitative research takes place at the time of observation or interviewing helps the researcher to identify the problems and understand the situation. Reflective note taking or audio records were used to capture the content for further subject interpretation of the content in a systematic process.

Data coding techniques were also employed to help organize and analyze the data that are collected during qualitative research. Coding is the process of combing the data for ideas and categories and then marking similar passages of text with a code label so that they can easily be retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and

analysis. Coding the data makes it easier to search the data, to make comparisons and to identify any patterns that require further investigation, (Taylor, C and Gibbs, G R, 2010).

Taken into account the two data coding steps, qualitative coding Level 1 was used to focus and label quantitative data for further categorization of data by using Qualitative coding Level 2 (Christopher Hahn, 2008). Behaviors, activities, and conditions were the primary categories to give identification of idea or concept, the number of codes derived from the data will represent the ideas and concepts to become more apparent. At this stage, reexamining and comparing or contrasting of patterns would help the researcher to integrate or discover a new dimension of the category in which help to justify conclusions of research findings.





## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data were gathered by using semi-structured interview technique with 15 conveniently selected respondents at Bumrungrad International, Samitivej Sukhumvit Hospital, and Bangkok Hospital Medical Center. The respondents were selected on the basis that they travel to Thailand for medical purposes and those who are engaged in providing medical services to international patients.

#### 4.1 Demographic profiles of respondents

The demographic information was included in the interview questions. The intended respondents, international medical tourists, were 15 requested to identify their demographic categories that included: (1) Gender, 2) Age, (3) Country of Residence, and (4) Frequency of Visit. To understand the sample population based on demographics, Tables 4.1 through 4.4 summarizes these data by the respondents' general information.

**Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Gender**

Demographic Background	Quantity	Percent (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	9	60
Female	6	40
Total	15	100

Table 4.1 illustrates this data. A majority of the respondents, 9 (60 %) respondents were male, while 6 (40%) of the respondents were female.

**Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Age**

Age Range	Quantity	Percent (%)
21 - 40	6	40.00
41 - 60	8	53.33
Over 60	1	6.67
Total	15	100

Table 4.2 depicts the age of respondents of the interview. There were 6 (40%) respondents came from the age bracket of 21 – 40, 8 (53.33%) respondents came from the 41 - 60 age bracket and 1 (6.67%) respondents came from over 60 age bracket.

**Table 4.3 Descriptive Statistics of Country of Residence**

Country of Residence	Quantity	Percent (%)
The Middle East	4	26.67
Europe	4	26.67
East Asia	3	20.00
Southeast Asia	2	13.33
The Americas	1	6.67
Oceania	1	6.67
Total	15	100

Table 4.3 shows a snapshot of the country of residence or nationality of the respondents. Out of the 15 respondents, the highest number of respondents came from the Middle East with a total number of four (26.67%), then Europe with four respondents (26.67%), then East Asia with three respondents (20%), then the Southeast Asia with two respondents (13.33%), then The Americas with one respondents (6.67%) and then Oceania with one respondents (6.67%).

**Table 4.4 Descriptive Statistics of Frequency of Visit**

Frequency of Visit	Quantity	Percent (%)
First Visit	6	40
Revisit	9	60
Total	15	100

The frequency of visit of international medical tourists to Thailand is shown in Table 4.4 There were six respondents (40%) disclosed that it is their first time visiting the country for medical treatment purposes while nine respondents (60%) declared that they have been to Thailand before for health care services, therefore, is considered as a revisit.

## 4.2 Research Findings

This chapter included an examination of the study findings and a summary of those findings. There are 15 respondents engaged in the interviews and provided perceived level of importance of the factors influencing their preference in choosing hospitals in Thailand as their medical tourism destination. The factors being considered are categorized by choice of country location and choice of facility respectively to effectively describe the relationship between independent and dependent variable factors affecting decision-making process to the final destination for medical tourists.

From the interviews, respondents represented different country of residents Middle East, Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, The Americas, and Oceania. The results revealed that the majority of respondents decided to choose medical tourism destination in Thailand for reasons that hospitals in Thailand provide board certified and internationally trained physicians as mentioned by 14 out of 15 respondents, followed by quality of care (13 out of 15 respondents), quality of facilities and JCI accredited hospitals/infrastructure (13 out of 15 respondents), and fast medical attention (10 out of 15 respondents), respectively.

The following were the statements provided by respondents in relation to the affirmation of the research findings:

#### 4.2.1 Physicians Training

From the interviews, almost all respondents agreed that physicians training play the important part in their decision-making process to choose hospital by sharing their experiences as follows;

“I made my decision to come to Thailand for medical treatment as I trust the physicians’ expertise and their professionalism. The smooth hospital experience I received here in Thailand is exceptional, even compared to Singapore. The medical team provided fantastic care and repair with their profession. I am very impressed that I’ve returned to this level after the operation to function so quickly.”

“I had a knee surgery completed by one of the experienced doctor at hospital A last year. I want to let you know that the care that I received from him was outstanding with his professional, skilled and especially caring and genuine. The procedure went very well without complications.”

“I was recommended mine a friend of mine who had gone through the surgery and all recovered just fine. The Japanese translators helped us feel safe and to settle comfortably at the hospital. The doctor helped us by listening carefully and explained with full explanation about the treatment. I felt at ease by the professionalism of the doctor and staffs who are well trained and, therefore, the language barrier is not a problem here.”

“We have heard about hospital A for quite some time to the fact that their doctors are internationally accepted. The doctor at hospital A is beyond words to come by to describe the skills and dedication she has. We feel as comfortable and confident with in putting our lives in her hands. We would choose her for the surgery no matter what the cost.”

“Before my travel I have searched for best medical doctors in Asia, and I found hospital A with an excellent reputation. All my experiences have been so superior that I cannot compare anyone to Dr. A. He sets the superior standard for caring services and treatment. Not being able to speak Thai was not a problem.”

These statements are in line with the study by Smith and Forgione, 2008, that one of the most famous hospitals in Thailand, Bumrungrad International Hospital, which is the top facility for global medical tourists, advertises that over 200 of its

doctors are board certified in the United States and that is the most concerned when it comes to life-threatening condition.

#### **4.2.2 Quality of Care**

From the interviews, quality of care is praised to be one of the top influencing factors for choosing hospitals. Testimonials provided by hospitals and word of mouth are the reliable source of information that patients seek for healthcare services. The respondents shared their experiences as follows;

“Admittedly, quality of care and experienced plastic surgeons are my most concerned when I started planning for my medical trip. I received cosmetic surgery on my face, eyes and neck last year, everything went well, and until now I am still very happy with the effects, it changed my life forever. I’ve got to give credits to an amazing hospital, facilities, and staffs.”

“I have to say that hospital B is an exceptional leader in health care industry, and this is a distinction that I believe is well deserved. The quality of care is excellent and medical assistants are kind and pay so much attention as if I am the only patient.”

“I had an accident and came into the hospital in so much pain and so scared but the process from entering until the follow-up care was the most amazingly wonderful experience. I have never had this type of quality care even in the United States.”

These statement are in line with the study by Jutamas Rerkrujipimol and Ilian Assenov, 2011, well-trained medical staffs and specialists with high technology for treatments are important that medical tourists also consider standard and quality of medical treatments. The aforementioned experiences shared by patients have proved that aside of proven experience of medical specialists, overall quality of care also plays important role when seeking for a final medical destination even when it comes to emergency cases.

#### **4.2.3 Quality of Facilities and JCI accredited hospitals/infrastructure**

From the interviews, not many people are aware of Joint Commission International (JCI), whereas the international quality standard and top-notch facilities provided by hospitals in Thailand are exceptional as mentioned in many medical or

leading business related magazines. The respondents also shared their experiences as follows:

“I’ve known about hospital A a year ago. It is a hospital of high standard with international certified level and quality. The doctors are well experienced and professional. The hospital equipment is modern and high technological.”

“The JCI standard, speed, and delivery of care and service were unprecedented; this was beyond exceptional. The hospital and overall area are impeccably clean. I felt more like a traveling in a 5-star hotel than a simple patient in a hospital. Hospital A disgraces any hospital I have ever visited in any country.”

“Extraordinary service for both customer service and professional medical care, capabilities, use of technology and presentation are more than world class.”

“I have traveled to many countries and seen many private hospitals, but hospital B has a world-class facility, dedicated professionals and support staff.”

These statements are in line with the study by Erik Cohen, 2008, supported the idea that private leading hospitals in Thailand are reliable on a high quality of service and highly qualified doctors. Patients seek for reliable quality of facility before making decision of where they would want to receive the service.

#### **4.2.4 Fast Medical Attention**

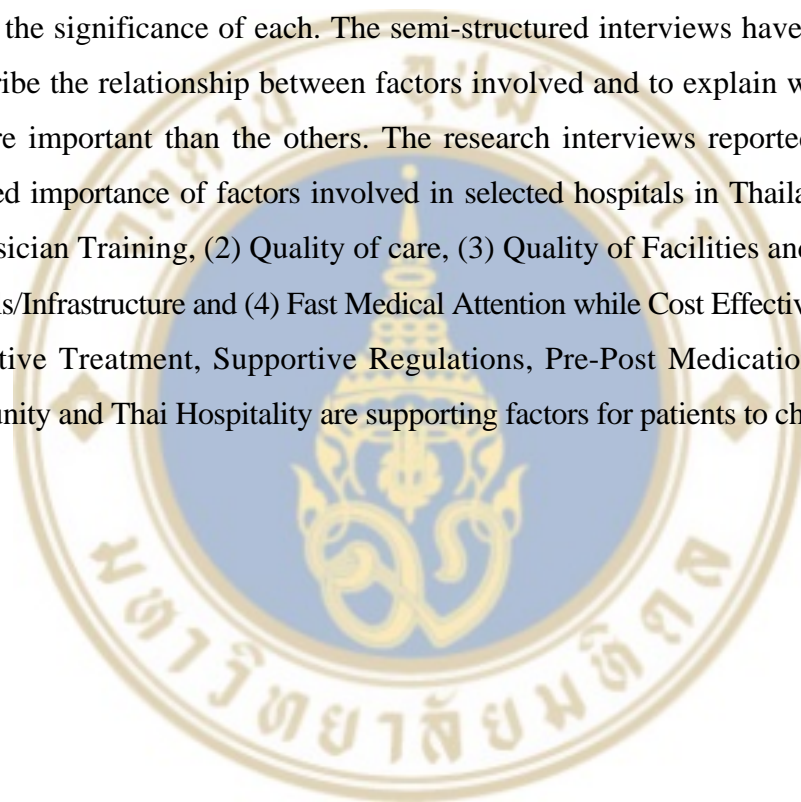
From the interviews, some of the patients shared experience about fast medical assistant provided by the private hospital in Thailand that is considered as one of the attractive factors for the industry. The experiences are shared as follows;

“In the year 2009, I had an eye infection. I came to hospital A and waited for approximately 20 minutes (with no prior appointment). The service, professionalism, and overall performance is superb. This year I came back for an annual checkup, and again service was fast and excellent as I expected. Hospital A sets a very high standard that other hospitals should follow.”

“This is the first time for me to travel outside of my country for medical purpose and it shown of the very professional system that hospital A has. I am looking to come back and know more about the hospital. My purpose of this visit to Thailand is to have a check-up, and it was a good experience with excellent & fast service.

This finding supported the study by Bruce Patsner, M.D., J.D. 2008, health care programs in some of the countries patients may have to be on waiting lists more than a year for surgery, while in Thailand, patients can easily walk-in to access medical care with fast attention by medical assistants at any private hospitals that mark a distinctive service for Thailand medical tourism.

This research findings determined the influencing factors preferred by customers in choosing hospitals in Thailand for medical treatment purposes. A total of ten primary determinants for choosing medical tourism destination were observed and defined the significance of each. The semi-structured interviews have been performed to describe the relationship between factors involved and to explain why some factors are more important than the others. The research interviews reported the ranking of perceived importance of factors involved in selected hospitals in Thailand as following; (1) Physician Training, (2) Quality of care, (3) Quality of Facilities and JCI Accredited Hospitals/Infrastructure and (4) Fast Medical Attention while Cost Effectiveness, Holistic & Alternative Treatment, Supportive Regulations, Pre-Post Medication Rehabilitation Opportunity and Thai Hospitality are supporting factors for patients to choose hospitals.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Practical Implications**

Medical tourism, a shared sector between health care and tourism industry, thrives to make a significant contribution to country's revenues. With numbers of medical treatments provided to international medical tourists by Thai private hospitals is expected to grow revenue by 15% year-on-year. In line with the growth statistic, industry players could exploit this research study to reinforce their position in the market by considering the factors affecting the attractiveness of Thailand medical tourism.

The research findings can benefit both public and private sectors. The Tourism Authority of Thailand representing the main supporter for this business segment can adopt the findings to effectively implement the marketing campaign by promoting Thailand to be hub of medical tourism, focusing on specific attracting factors that can influence patients' decision making. Along with the private sectors, collaboration from medical service providers, travel agencies, and medical travel agencies would help strengthen the core competency that Thailand is pointed to be the hub for medical tourist. In order to maintain the core competency, hospitals or healthcare service providers should also consistently improve quality of services to ensure the optimal satisfaction when patients come to use the service.

#### **5.2 Limitations of the study & Recommendations for future research**

This research study was designed to gather the data from interviewing international medical patients of Bumrungrad International Hospital, Samitivej Sukhumvit Hospital, and Bangkok Hospital Medical Center. These mentioned hospitals value their patients' privacy. Hence, research interviews are not allowed to be conducted inside the hospitals. Furthermore, due to time limitation, the respondents were only restricted to international medical patients that have adequate English proficiency that allowed



them to answer the questions with clear understanding. A sufficient outcome should have been explored from this study if more respondents were allowed to participate in the interview.

### **5.2.1 Future Research Recommendations**

This research study is focused on the influencing factors affecting the attractiveness of Thailand medical. As a recommendation on future research, a qualitative and qualitative method of the research study of international patients' satisfaction and customer loyalty of medical tourists receiving medical treatments in Thailand would allow deeper understanding consumer behavior for the reasons why medical tourists return to Thailand for health care services. Another recommendation is a study o customer perception towards overall service quality of the various hospitals in Thailand. This study could determine the hotels and airline providers that cater to medical tourists. Different package deals that hotels and airline providers typically offer to medical travelers could also be explored in this study. A future research study on customer perception of Thailand's brand image as a medical tourism hub in Asia would allow an in-depth knowledge of Thailand's competitive strengths and core competencies that could be used as an advantage for the country to compete in the emerging global medical tourism industry.

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## Appendix A: The interview guide

**Introduction:** This interview is the part of research in order to study factors affecting decision making process for patients to choose Thailand as medical treatment destination.

**Length of interview:** 15-30 minutes approximately.

### Interview guide questions

Some example of the semi-structured interview questions are provided below:

1) Have you ever been to any other country for healthcare purposes, if yes, please indicate country and reason?

2) What are the sources of information that help you make a decision in choosing the medical treatment destination?

3) What is your primary concern regarding the choice of country for medical treatment purpose?

4) What are your short-listed countries before your final decision?

5) What are your influencing factors or criteria to choose Thailand as your prime destination?

6) What is your expectation toward country's destination?

7) What are top three most relevant factors that helped you choose Thailand as your medical treatment destination? And what are other relevant factors you considered?

7.1) Cost Effectiveness

7.2) JCI Accredited Hospitals/Infrastructure

7.3) Quality of Care

7.4) Physician Training

7.5) Holistic & Alternative Treatment

7.6) Supportive Regulations

7.7) Pre-Post Medication Rehabilitation Opportunity

7.8) Quality of Facilities

7.9) Thai Hospitality

7.10) Fast Medical Attention