

IDENTIFYING FACTORS AFFECTING DESTINATION CHOICE OF MEDICAL TOURISTS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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Published online: 08 August 2017

ABSTRACT

Objective:

Overseas travels in which improved health is the main component, “medical tourism”, has emerged as a new source of competitive advantage all over the world. The present study seeks to identify the factors that affect destination choice of medical tourists.

Methods:

We systematically searched relevant databases including Pub Med, Embase, Science Direct, Web of Science and Medline databases using terms “medical tourism” OR “health tourism”. Studies were identified and screened in accordance with the preferred Reporting Items for Systematic and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) published in English or Farsi, determining factors that develop

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doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jfas.v9i2s.846>



country's ability to become a preferred destination for outbound patients seeking healthcare services in foreign countries.

Results

The search retrieved (1374) citation of which 18 studies were eligible. Across the eligible articles, 13 overarching themes including 75 that encourage medical tourists to choose a specific destination sub-themes emerged.

Conclusions

Results of this study offer evidence for a comprehensive approach to strategic outreach and market expansion for medical tourism decision makers for attracting more medical tourists to their countries.

Keywords: Medical tourism, health tourism, attractive factors, destination choice

INTRODUCTION

Medical Tourism (MT), which defined as the practice of patients travelling long distance to overseas country with the express purpose of receiving medical interventions for the enhancement or restoration of their health without any formal referral from their home country, has become increasingly ubiquitous not only in healthcare settings, but also in the communities as a whole (1-4). It has grown considerably in recent decade primarily due to multiple reasons like long waiting lists in rich countries, strong demand for quality healthcare, etc. (5, 6) coupled with the availability of inexpensive alternatives in low and middle income countries (7).

The global gross profit generated from this industry is calculated as roughly 60 billion (US\$) per year and is expected to be experienced an annual growth of more than 20% (8). Competition for these expenditures among countries through promoting medical tourism is a necessity not to be ignored.

The governments' biggest hurdle in this industry is the challenge of persuading overseas potential (medical) travelers that medical and relevant services in destination countries is comparable with those of other countries (6).

Policy makers searching for competitiveness of their region need to identify and make use of different strategies that help lead to success in increasing their countries' popularity and attracting more international patients.

Despite medical tourism has been the subject of intense debate within the scientific community about its development, advantages, challenges, attractive forces, marketing etc. (9-12), far too little attention has been paid to exploring factors determining a patient choice of a country in any systematic way up to now.

The present systematic review aims at identifying the factors which may enhance countries' abilities to attract more medical tourists as a popular destination country. The results of this study can help to identify the enablers which may be practical for state and national medical tourism decision makers, in all countries, for working out strategies to deal with difficulties and to become a preferred medical tourism spot.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Eligibility Criteria

applying Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Data Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (13), we searched PubMed, Embase, Science Direct, Web of Science and Medline databases using simple search terms "medical tourism" or "health tourism" (to ensure that all pertinent citations were captured), along with searching the reference lists of identified articles for additional pertinent articles. The entire review process took place between Sep 2016 and Jan 2017. The final search was conducted on Nov, 31, 2016.

Selection process

Electronic search results were collected in an Endnote library (for de-duplication of records).

Firstly, one of the authors (BN) screened all article references based on title and abstract to identify potentially eligible articles (and RE independently cross-checked the initial results) on the basis of the following inclusion criteria:

Medical tourism OR Health tourism: only studies that concern medical/health tourism were included in the selection.

Factors affecting destination choice: records should aim at identifying decisive factors that play important roles in choosing a specific medical tourism destination among medical tourists (Competitive advantages of countries and not countries' low competitiveness). The reasons why patients seek medical care abroad were not of interest.

Original research: Conference proceedings, commentaries, editorials and letters were excluded.

English or Persian language: we excluded articles published in other languages

Then two of the authors (RE and SS) independently screened remaining articles' complete full text to confirm eligibility.

Two reviewers (RE and BN) independently rated the included studies using CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) checklists as quality appraisal tool.

Inter-rater reliability (for both study selection and quality appraisal processes) was assessed applying kappa statistic (14). Substantial agreement was observed between raters for the full text review and quality appraisal of the included articles. Whenever one of them was doubtful about eligibility or quality, agreement was reached through discussion.

Data collection process

A data extraction form was designed prior to data collection. One author (BN) independently extracted study characteristics (name of the first author, publication year, country, study design and research objective) as well as key findings related to factors attracting international patients to a destination country from included articles, and another reviewer (SS) verified the data extracted. In any event of disagreement between them, consensus was reached through discussion, and using third reviewer (RE) as required. For mixed-methods studies, we extracted only the qualitative components.

Data Synthesis

We synthesized the findings of included articles with the methodology of thematic synthesis proposed by Thomas and Haden (15).

RESULTS

Our search strategy resulted in (1374) citations; after screening title, (976) abstracts and (120) full text articles were reviewed, and (18) studies were chosen to be included in this systematic review (Figure 1). All eligible articles were considered to be of good quality.

Although there was no time limitation for search strategy in this study, the publication year of all included papers is from 2000 onwards.

The included studies were conducted on a comprehensive range of stakeholders, including medical tourist, academic experts and medical tourism experts. We collected a total of N factors (subthemes) related to medical tourist attraction factors under (N) main themes as follows:

Theme 1: Medical cost

One of the most important issues in attracting foreign patients to a country is medical cost. In this regards reasonable price(8, 9, 16-28) is a main factor. Medical tourists compare service costs and look for the destinations where provide their desired services at low and affordable price.

The price is not the only factor which affects medical tourists' destination but cost transparency(22) is also important factor. It means that potential medical tourists should be clearly aware of what cost items were included in deriving the total cost.

The strategy of various service package(22)(in which the price is determined in a way that in addition to the main medical service which is demanded by patient, other medical and diagnostic related services are also included) and also fixed package price for service(22) can also draw the attention of medical tourists.

Offering a credible international insurance system(8, 21, 29-31) to financially support foreign patients has been reported as a key factor in attracting them.

Theme 2: Quality of medical services

Under this category, foreign patients look for destinations in which quality indicators of clinical service easier acceptable. These indicators can include medical errors, rate of nosocomial infections and so on(8, 9, 17, 18, 23-26, 28, 29).

Moreover, success rate of medical interventions is another factor international patients give a lot of importance to(23, 28). Before choosing a particular destination for treatment, medical tourists want to know how much the success rate of interventions is in there.

Medical tourists also want to ensure the compliance of interventions with evidence-based medicine(19, 25, 27).

Among these, continuity of care(8), which ensures foreign patients that can receive reliable post-care service if necessary, is another factor that can be effective both in keeping the current customers and attracting more other potential foreign customers.

Considering the importance of quality of services for this type of tourists, participating in an international accreditation(16, 17, 20, 26, 30), which gives the assurance of an internationally accepted level of professional standard of care, has been known as a competitive advantage for tourist attraction areas. Providing national strict criteria for medical standard(32) has also been suggested as an attractive incentive to select a country for medical purpose.

Another most important aspect of quality which plays a pivotal role in foreign patients' decision making process about their destination is low waiting time(9, 16, 24, 25, 29, 30, 33).

Theme 3: Service Coverage

Service Coverage as an important theme related to attracting foreign patients has been noticed in previous studies under three sub-categories.

One of these aspects relates to wide variety of available medical specialties and service types(16, 18, 24-26, 30, 34). These factors have been stated as motivational factors for choosing a particular country by medical tourists.

Providing comprehensive care(8, 25) in every specialty is also an advantage making a destination country popular among medical tourism patients. That means all intervention-related services (including surgery, anesthesia, para-clinical services, pain relief and so on) should be available and all of them should be preferably proposed in a comprehensive service package in one building.

Providing special types of interventions(16, 22)(such as organ transplants, and interventions related to sex), which aren't proposed in some countries due to any reasons, can be also considered as an advantage.

Theme 4: Medical staff

According to the literature, destination choice is greatly affected by medical staff attributes.

As most important dimensions of this theme: available(8, 23), vastly experienced and highly competent medical professionals (16, 18, 19, 21, 26, 29-31) in adequate number(23, 26) has been mentioned in the previous studies as very significant factors in developing medical tourism in a destination.

Other important medical staff-related factor include internationally Recognized reputation of physicians(16, 30).

Medical tourists also give a great importance to the availability of highly(8, 18, 20, 21, 26) and western trained physicians(16), with long professional experience in western countries(16).

In addition to the medical staff, western trained executive and management staff have been also stated in a study as a factor for attracting foreign patients(16).

Apart from staff technical skills, their ability to talk in English(21, 26) is stated as one of the features which leads to eliminating cultural differences and appropriate communication of patient and physician and as the result acts as a major driver of internationalization of health services.

Warmth and good behavior of medical staff (22, 23, 26, 27, 29) is also a key factor that positively influence the number of foreign patients visiting the country.

Theme 5: Health system infrastructure

One of the emerged themes related to the factors attracting medical tourists is health system-related infrastructure. In this regard, availability of modern and high-tech equipment (16, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, 33, 34) is one of the important elements that Researchers generally agree that it may contribute to creating favorable intentions toward a destination country. In addition, Fair size of hospitals (20) (based on bed number) as well as different types of hospitals (20) (including general, educational, special) have been stated as factors that have significant effect on intentions to visit medical clinic of a destination country (table 1).

Recognized international reputation of hospital and service provider centers as tourist centers is also an advantage which is looked for by international patients. The number of countries that the hospital is exporting its services in, total number of international patients the hospital served in the past and also years of hospital's regular international interventions (experience of hospitals in participating in medical tourism industry) (20) can be mentioned in this case.

The availability of a wide range of medicines (especially rare drugs) has been also mentioned as competitive advantage in attracting medical tourist (20, 26, 29).

Having an effective Health Information System (HIS) (25, 30, 31) that records the information of foreign patients for later referrals, is of other health system infrastructure features that international patients deploy in choosing a hospital. In this regard, the other factor that can be successful in attracting international patients is protected privacy and confidentiality (8, 16, 26) of medical information.

Pioneering medical researches (31) which create Evidenced based medicine is also in the lists of factors that can draw the attention of international patient for a country.

One of the other infrastructural factors of health systems driving international patient preferences in destination choice is comprehensive internet website (30) which is responds to the needs of foreign patients.

Theme 6: Accommodation

According to some of studies, tourists consider accommodation conditions in the process of choosing a destination for their medical traveling. Putting accommodation in service package of

foreign patients can build up the reputation of a country as an attractive medical destination (28). It is believed that convenient (8, 16, 24, 29) international hotels (26) located in hospitals' campus (8, 19, 21, 26, 28, 30) are important factors that can determine a patient's choice of hospital or destination. Moreover, welfare amenities (29) of these hotels (accessing to the internet and so on) affect destination choices among this group of tourists. Quality of offered food (18) in these hotels as well as providing disability dietary (26) for patients is a key attribute in building international customers' intentions.

In this area, the importance of reasonable costs of accommodation (8, 26, 27, 30) in choosing destination for receiving medical services have been clearly highlighted in the studies.

Theme 7: Travel arrangements

Travelling is the inherent characteristics of medical tourism and numerous important factors in attracting medical tourists are embedded in this area.

One of them is ease of visa and immigration procedures (16, 18, 20, 30, 32). Through eliminating cumbersome regulations for receiving medical visa, a particular medical tourism destination can attract more foreign patients.

Another factor that was explored is the international (26) and local (24, 26, 30, 32) transportation system of the countries. Whatever the transportation system is more developed, more attraction of medical tourists will be feasible. Low price (23-25, 27, 28, 30) of using this transportation system is another motivation for potential medical tourists.

Medical tourists' guides in finding medical destinations (8, 21) is another factor that can promote their interest in a country through reducing the effort needed to find medical care providers.

Theme 8: Marketing

According to many studies, an effective marketing system can put a country on the global medical tourism map

is of the most important factors that can play a pivotal role in choosing destination by medical tourists. In this regard, all natural and medical advantages the country should be introduced and highlighted (18, 24, 29, 32). In this regard, running marketing campaigns in media and virtual spaces (22, 25, 31, 32) can be effective factor. Brand positioning (18) is also mentioned among the factors that can encourage medical tourists for a particular destination.

Two of the studies (8, 32) has also described establishing international medical tourism offices as an important issue.

Theme 9: Tourism attractions

General tourism attractions can be effective on medical tourists while they are choosing their destination. National parks, entertainment centers, historical sites, spa resorts, and wide range of beverage outlets of counties are of the cases which medical tourists want to enjoy during their stay(8, 19, 25, 27, 29, 30).

These services and facilities at low price(8, 9, 26) may be effective in leading foreign patients more to a particular country.

Theme 10: Economic situation of countries

Economic climate(20, 35) of a country can be influential in decision-making of medical tourists. An interesting finding reported by one of papers indicated that working as social immigrant workers(19) for a period of time can also persuade the patients to choose that destination. Availability of and stability of international currency(26) can be also attractive factors for medical tourists. International electronic banking can also facilitate foreign patient payment. The existence of business centers(29) has been mentioned as another important factor.

Theme 11: Social background of countries

In regard of social factors, cultural linkage and local people's thought towards the foreigners(20, 26, 27, 29) is a relevant factor in contributing the attractiveness of a medical destination country. Their friendliness and hospitality(16, 21, 27, 29) is of the social factors that can act as a positive contribution towards medical tourist attraction, too. In addition, in the literature, the role of preserving religious values(20) (e.g. halal foods for the Muslims) and making pilgrimages(19, 29) were highlighted in building visit intention among patients from abroad.

According to two of the studies, another important social factor that international patients may consider in their assessment of a special destination is English-speaking ability of general public(16, 26).

Theme 12: security

Some of the factors that affect the foreign patient arrivals to a country relates to security issues. Medical travelers want a secure and crime-free environment(16, 21, 23, 26) not to get in trouble. Studies also identified that providing possibility of malpractice litigation(21, 26) for foreign patients is important consideration for medical tourists in choosing a travel destination.

In this regard, Political stability(16, 26) can influence the travel motivations of medical travelers in selecting specific tourist destinations.

Theme 13: Managers' commitment

The role of management commitment in promoting medical travel to a country has been well recognized in the literature. The number of foreign patients per year that hospitals/countries set as a goal in their strategic plan(20) is one sign of management commitment. The other case which has been mentioned in this regard is developing hospitals and medical facilities that provide services only to patients from other countries(20) or if the hospital isn't exclusively for foreign patients, hospital staff should be trained about the phenomenon of medical tourism(20). Financial resources and the number of full-time employees whom the hospital has assigned exclusively for international patient services (such as translators) are also indicators of managers' commitment for attracting foreign patients(20).

In macro level also in order to promote medical tourism, a national program of strengthening medical tourism(20, 31) can be designed. In this regards close cooperation between all involved organizations in medical tourism industry (tourism ministry, health ministry, foreign ministry, business ministry and ...) due to attracting more foreign patients and providing appropriate conditions for them by a national coordinator center for medical tourism.

Discussion

Considering increasing competition in developing medical tourism industry in the world, this study sought to identify effective factors on attracting medical tourists.

The current study found that reasonable price and high quality of medical services, which have been mentioned in almost all studies, are the most attractive factors. The importance of which is to the extent that the sole reason outbound patients have to travel is mentioned as difference of these factors in different countries, according to some studies(39-36). In regard of service quality, HoLH et al in a study in Taiwan designed a model for analyzing the quality of provided services to international patients and found that most important cases that were identified in their study are consistent with the results of the current study(40). The issue which has to be taken into consideration is that not only these two factors are mentioned first related to main medical services but also they have to be included in next degrees of all related areas of tourism industry (such as welfare services and accommodation, national and international transportation system and even the souvenirs of a country) because the studies have shown that developing medical tourism in a country severely depends on its general tourism industry(41).

The role of medical staff in attracting medical tourists to a destination country has been well recognized in the literature. Adequate number of them with high communicational, behavioral and professional skills should be available. Schlosser, M and F. Le have also mentioned its importance so that “the rate of medical staff displacement” is considered as qualitative indicators that international accreditation organizations should notice them because whatever the rate of this indicator is higher, the dissatisfaction will be more and as the result treatment processes will face challenges (42).

Health systems infrastructure in a country is also certainly of the criteria for choosing destination for the patients who look for other countries to meet their required services. This finding is consistent with results found by Seetanah et al that concluded tourists from any type, not just medical tourists, are severely sensitive to available infrastructures in the countries which have in their list for traveling (43) and what is more important than medical infrastructures such as developed medical centers and equipment for medical tourists?

The role of political and managerial commitment also has been highlighted in this study. Johnston et al has been also mentioned this factor as one of the most important tools of developing this industry in Jamaica. This commitment has been defined in the literature as close cooperation between business, health, tourism and industry ministries (44).

The authors of this paper believe that if there is no effective advertisement system to reflect medical tourism-related capabilities in international scale, the attempts to develop the industry will fail. A researcher expressed that advertising the country’s capabilities and health facilities in the international media, involving the embassies of other countries, providing brochures and pamphlets for the tourists, participating in the international medical exhibitions, creating port information and preparing pictures of health centers and putting them up at airports and terminals can be the solutions for promoting Iran tourism industry (45) while his countryman Afshani has considered weakness in informing about medical capabilities related to medical tourism as the most important weakness of his own country in the area of medical tourism (46). Considering the results of this study based on the importance of tourism attraction (such as recreational, historical, religious areas and ...), these capabilities should be well introduced in advertisement campaigns.

Implication for practice

Considering the findings of this study, the role which authorities of medical tourism industry in different countries are responsible for, generally seem to consist of two main and key parts which

include promotional roles and marketing roles. In better words, they have to first evaluate their current status related to the cases which have been identified as the important factors in the attractiveness of a country or a medical center in attracting international patients systematically and then considering their priorities, try to promote these cases continues in their responsibility area. in second role, they have to be sure that the continues promotion of them is well known by potential medical tourists and persuade them that whatever they look for is ready for them. This issue is possible using international marketing different strategies. All of these should be under the supervision of a single and national coordinator organization in charge.

Strengths and weaknesses of the study:

As far as we know, this study is the first systematic study which have collected potential factors of medical tourist attraction without being limited to a particular context or countries.

But this study has also its own weaknesses. Considering intense competition among medical tourist attraction centers, most of them don't share the information related to their experiences and strategies for attracting foreign patients and as the result the number of references which we were looking for in this study is limited.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCHES

The future researches are recommended to try to identify the most important medical services which patients travel because of them. The criteria of choosing destination by medical tourists according to themselves need more investigations. Moreover, the research gap of experiences and innovations of successful countries in attracting international patients can be clearly felt.

CONCLUSION

Now that the importance of medical tourism industry is clear to everybody, to have more share of it, the countries should design and implement comprehensive as well as systematic programs to integrate and coordinate all their capabilities due to this. This study includes the cases that can be as a guide for micro and macro decision makers and authorities of medical tourist industry to be able to choose and use the best strategies to increase their share in this market.

Acknowledgments

This study was supported by International campus Iran University of Medical Sciences officials and staff. Thus, the authors find it incumbent to appreciate the president, managers and all the staff members.

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Fig.1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

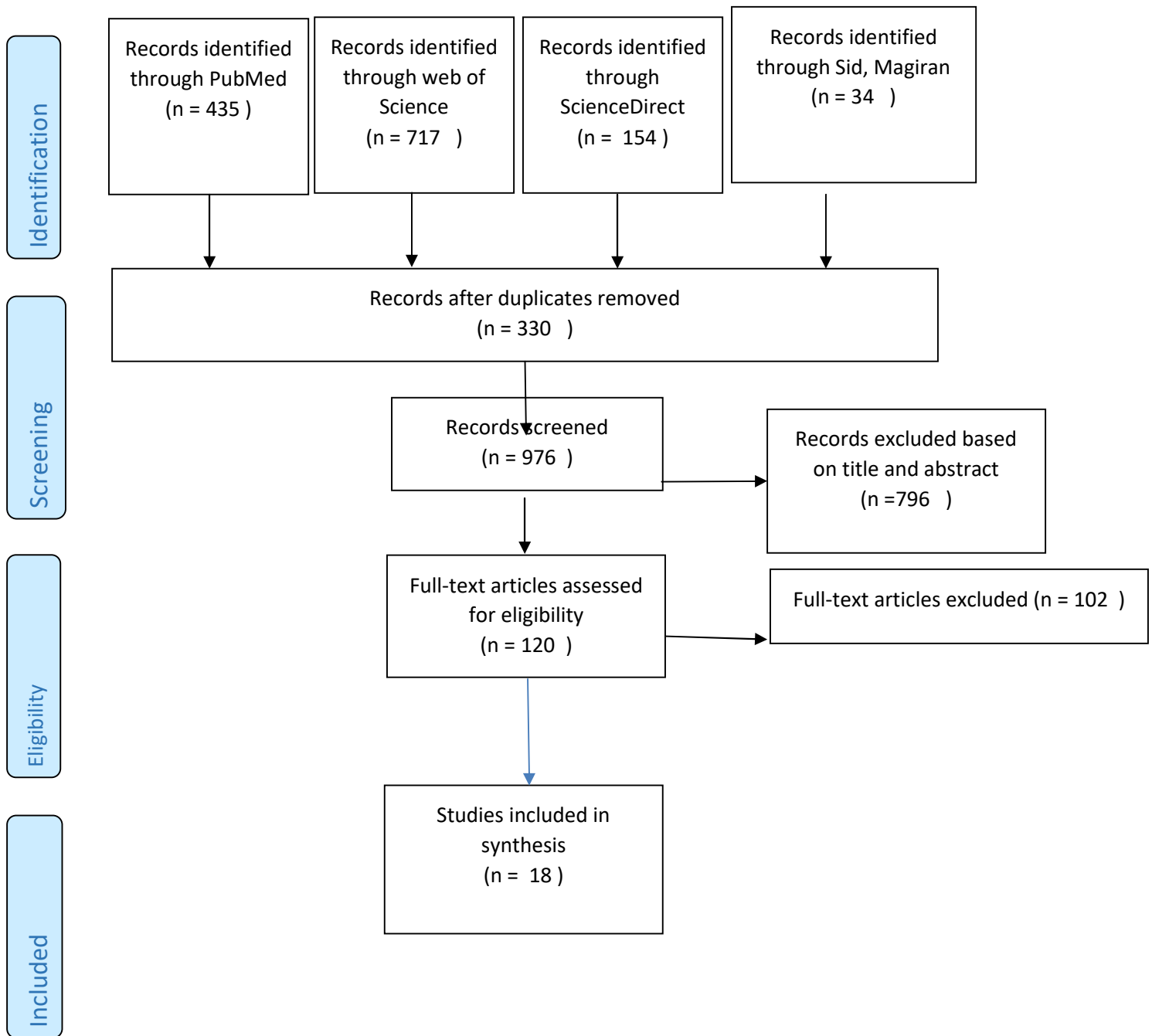


Table 1. emerged themes

Medical cost	<p>Reasonable price</p> <p>Cost transparency</p> <p>Strategy of various service package</p> <p>Fixed package price for service</p> <p>Credible international insurance system</p>
Quality of medical services	<p>Success rate of medical interventions</p> <p>Quality indicators of clinical services</p> <p>Evidence-based medicine</p> <p>Continuity of care</p> <p>Participating in an international accreditation</p> <p>Providing national strict criteria for medical standard</p> <p>Low waiting time</p>
Service Coverage	<p>Wide variety of available medical specialties</p> <p>Variety of services</p> <p>Special types of interventions</p>
Medical staff	<p>Experienced medical staff</p> <p>Highly competent professional</p> <p>Recognized reputation of physicians</p> <p>Highly trained medical staff</p> <p>Highly trained physicians</p> <p>Western trained physicians</p> <p>Western experienced physicians</p> <p>Western trained executive and management staff</p> <p>English-speaking medical staff</p> <p>Good behavior of medical staff</p> <p>Adequate number of various medical staff</p>
Health system infrastructure	<p>Modern and high-tech equipment</p> <p>Fair size of hospitals</p> <p>Different types of hospitals</p> <p>Recognized international reputation of hospitals and other care</p>

	<p>providers</p> <p>Number of target countries of hospitals</p> <p>Experience of hospitals in participating in medical tourism industry</p> <p>Wide range of medicines</p> <p>Effective HIS</p> <p>Privacy and confidentiality</p> <p>Pioneering medical researches</p> <p>Comprehensive internet website</p>
Accommodation	<p>Putting accommodation in service package</p> <p>International hotels</p> <p>Convenient hotels</p> <p>Hotels located in hospitals' campus</p> <p>Welfare amenities of hotels</p> <p>Quality of offered food</p> <p>Providing disability dietary</p> <p>Reasonable costs of accommodation</p>
Travel arrangements	<p>Easy visa and immigration procedures</p> <p>Improved international and local transportation system</p> <p>Cheap transportation services</p> <p>Medical tourist guides</p>
Marketing	<p>Introduction of medical tourism-related advantages</p> <p>Running media and internet-based marketing campaigns</p> <p>Brand positioning</p> <p>Establishing international medical tourism offices</p>
Tourism attractions	<p>National parks</p> <p>Entertainment centers</p> <p>Historical sites</p> <p>Spa resorts</p> <p>Beverage outlets of counties</p> <p>Low price</p>

Economic situation of the country	<p>Good economic growth</p> <p>Working as social immigrant workers</p> <p>Available international currency</p> <p>Stable international currency</p> <p>International electronic banking</p> <p>Business centers</p>
Social status of the country	<p>Local people's thought towards the foreigners</p> <p>Friendliness and hospitality of local people</p> <p>Preserving religious values</p>
security	<p>Secure and crime-free environment</p> <p>providing possibility of malpractice litigation</p> <p>Political stability</p>
Managers' commitment	<p>Medical tourism-related goals in strategic planning</p> <p>International patients-specific hospitals</p> <p>Providing financial resources and investments</p> <p>National Programme of improving medical tourism</p>

How to cite this article:

Najafi B, Raeissi P, Gorji H A, Ahmadi A, Haghghi M. Identifying factors affecting destination choice of medical tourists: a systematic review of literature. J. Fundam. Appl. Sci., 2017, 9(2S), 1309-1328.