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Accreditation of Hospitals: Assuring Quality Health Care for Medical Tourism in India

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ABSTRACT

“Quality of patient care” is a significant axiom in the emerging medical tourism industry and has become an essential prerequisite to subsist in the challenging and competitive industry. Quality of patient care incorporates everything the health care institution delivers, from how institutions care for their patients, to how they ensure effective, efficient and equitable service delivery and conform with occupational safety. Accreditation for health care organizations denotes third party assessment of the degree of conformity of the institutions with respect to a set of global bench mark set by international accreditors. As the quality of patient care in hospitals cannot be experienced prior to the availing of their treatment, international patients often select their overseas hospitals based on the accreditations. Though premium standards of patient care and cost effectiveness of medical treatment are the key motivators of their travel to emerging medical tourism destinations, accreditation of the chosen hospital is the most important factor in medical treatment destination selection. Accreditation ensures that cost effective health care does not mean inferior health care and provides informed patient choice on the hospitals they prefer for their overseas treatment. Through this article, a study is done about the evolution of international accreditation of patient care institutions (hospitals) and correlation of hospital accreditation, quality health care delivery and medical tourism in India.

1. Introduction

Increased numbers of patients are indulging in cross border travel for availing excellent health-care facilities, which are now available in developing countries. Better connectivity and relaxed medical visa norms have made it simple than earlier to traverse their home country's boundaries and obtain superior care at hospitals around the world. An improved transnational focus on redefining patient treatment outcomes, safety and quality care of patients and hospital staff have led stakeholders and healthcare provider establishments to espouse standardized processes for evaluating healthcare organizations based on Standard Operating Procedures (SoP's) through an accreditation process based on global standards. Accreditation elevates the confidence level and trust of the patients regarding their selection of hospitals for overseas health care since accreditation ensures that the member health care institutions follows and renders quality services and assures best benefits for the patients. Accreditation is a quality index, which guarantees that the health care institutions not only pursue evidence-based practices (EBP) but also has concern for access, cost effectiveness, efficacy, and unparalleled quality healthcare. Accreditation bridge the gulf of patient expectation- service mismatch or eliminates the grey extents of inadequacy and insufficiency and eventually institutes best standards, flawless service, professional accountability and clinical excellence. Accreditation signifies a voluntary procedure whereby healthcare institutions comply with the standards established by an external accrediting organization and ensures standardization, which reduces associated risks and optimization of clinical eminence and service care. In the realm of medical tourism, this accreditation is perceived as an instrument to assure uncompromised care and patient wellbeing by the health care institutions especially located in the emerging medical tourism destinations. International and national accreditation on global standards focus on the fundamental aspects of patient care to institute a protocol for the endurance of care, with proper processes for the patient's hospital discharge, procedure for reference to other institutions, if needed, follow-up and transit of cross border patients.

2. ACCREDITATION OF HEALTH CARE INSTITUTIONS

World Health Organization (WHO) observed that safety of patients is a matter of grave global public health concern. As per the estimates of WHO there is a one in a million chance of a person being injured while travelling by flight; while there is a one in 300 chance of a patient being harmed during his health care. As per WHO estimates, there are 421 million yearly hospitalizations in the world and nearly 42.7 million adverse events happen in patients during these hospitalizations. Moreover WHO has stated that based on the recent data, patient harm is the 14th important reason for morbidity and mortality across the globe (WHO 2019). Health care services that are safe, patient centric and of superior quality is a prerequisite for strengthening medical care systems and they have observed that there is an urgent requirement for the

standardization of treatment care and medical procedures across the globe. The consequence of this procedure is bestowing a grade or score to a health service organization, which signifies the degree of conformity to the set criteria prescribed. Accreditation is an acknowledgement and endorsement by a accreditor regarding the attainment of accreditation criteria by a hospital or medical care organization, confirmed through a third party peer appraisal on the level of performance of this institution undergoing accreditation against set standards.

International Society for Quality in Health Care Inc (ISQua) describes accreditation of Hospitals as “a self-assessment, independent peer assessment practiced by health care organizations to precisely gauge their degree of performance with set standards and to introduce and initiate avenues to constantly increase the health or social care system” (ISQua). Accreditation was defined by Scrivens (1995) as “a process used for the appraisal of the quality of organization’s performance which is centered on a system of independent third party peer appraisal using standards...an assessment of compliance with standards is conducted by health service personnel, on behalf of an independent body”. According to Zahir (2001) concerns for the quality and safety of the patient care provided abroad has also developed due to the dearth of well laid out of clinical governance measures and quality guarantee measures in provider organizations, envisioned to reassure the quality of care delivered to tourists”. Shaw, C. D. (2004) defined accreditation as a procedure where “competent external peer assessors assess a health care organization’s conformity with prescribed and defined performance criteria.” According to Pomey et al., (2004) the accreditation process encompasses “a self-assessment, an institution visit and compilation of a report about the assessed institution and then award international appreciation to the assessed institution”.

Unlike licensure which is a one-time process, accreditation emphasis on constant upgrading strategies and attainment of ideal quality criteria, rather than observance to nominal standards envisioned to guarantee public safety. Accreditation of health care institutions is “an official procedure to ensure offering of safe, premium health care built on standards and processes formulated and designed by medical professionals for medical care services which is a acknowledgement of achievement by a healthcare organization fulfilling the requirements of national healthcare standards (ISQua).

3. NEED OF ACCREDITATION FOR HEALTH CARE INSTITUTIONS

Patients who wish to avail overseas health care, give paramount priority to the quality of health care offered by health care institutions there rather than the cost effectiveness or less waiting time for treatments compared to their home country. This quality care is the key differentiator in the selection of overseas health care institution, as quality may significantly fluctuate from one medical care centre to another and from country to country. Accreditation inspire the execution of model healthcare administration systems and practices that cater

to the enhancement of the service delivery and its resultant quality, contributing to enhanced contentment and care for inpatients.

Accreditation signifies a voluntary procedure by which accredited health care institutions comply with the standards established by an external accrediting body, either international or national. This process of standardization ensured through accreditation is a risk reducing and quality optimization stratagem and can significantly escalate quality treatment and patient experience and result in escalation in patient volume.

Of late, there is high influx of tourists who require medical care to emerging medical tourism nations and accreditation will only be the sole differentiator in selection of health care institution when medical tourism market will be more competitive. In 2020 the international medical tourism market is valued at US Dollars 54.4 billion and it is estimated to reach US Dollars 207.9 billion by 2027, registering a CAGR of 21.1% growth (Grand View Research 2019). Indian Medical Tourism market is also forecasted to grow significantly from its present size of US Dollars 3 billion in 2015 to US Dollars 9 billion by the end 2020 (Ministry of Tourism).

The surge in medical tourism will make it imperative for health care organizations to improve and distinguish their services with an evidenced-based framework that comprises a thrust on enhanced patient experience, superior healthcare outcomes and flawless follow up care.

4. HISTORY OF GLOBAL & NATIONAL ACCREDITATION OF HEALTH CARE INSTITUTIONS

The initial concept of hospital accreditation dates back to 1860's when Florence Nightingale established a procedure for the collection and assessment of hospital statistics which reinforced the assurance on the quality of healthcare. The results of her study indicated that there is considerable disparity of mortality rates from one hospital to another (Sheingold BH & Hahn JA, 2014). Another pioneer in the concept of accreditation of health care was Dr. Earnest Codman who in 1914 initiated 'end result system', which enabled health care institutions to track the patients whom they treated and to get feedback whether their treatment had been effective. The Hospital Standardization Programme proposed by the American College of Surgeons (ACS) in 1919 received an awesome response from the medical fraternity (Dastur, F. 2012). The document published by them titled "*Standard of Efficiency*", is considered an earliest prototype of hospital accreditation standards. American College of Surgeons in 1924, published the hospital standardization program and is the precursor of the concepts of quality and safety (Roberts JS et.al 1987). In 1951, Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals (JCAH) was established and they retitled "*Standard of Efficiency*" as "*Hospital Accreditation Program*" (Chuang S et al 2019).

Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals (JCAH) was later renamed in 1987 into the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO). The institutions accredited by JCAHO were considered as ideal for treatment the patients as they assured quality care. In 2007, JCAHO was again

renamed as Joint Commission and then to Joint Commission International (JCI). Accreditation Canada, another accreditor, over the year, developed and launched “*Qmentum*”, a novel accreditation programme in 2008 that harnessed clinical appraisal tool with an organized assessment system (Tomasich, F et al 2020).

In India the accreditation of health care institutions dates back to 2005 with the formation of National Accreditation Board for Hospitals, Healthcare (NABH) to ensure quality and safety of health care services by pursuing evidence based medical treatment, and to ensure processes and systems to guarantee patient safety related aspects are in place (NABH).

5. INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION AGENCIES - ACCREDITOR OF ACCREDITORS

The International Society for Quality in Health Care (ISQua) and the United Kingdom Akkreditering Forum, (UKF) are the international accreditation organizations regarded as "the accreditor of accreditors". These organizations endorse global accreditation organizations like Joint Commission International (JCI), Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (ACHS), Accreditation Canada, Trent Accreditation Scheme Malaysian Society for Quality in Health, National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH) and Central Board for Accreditation of Healthcare Institutions (CBAHI), Saudi Arabia and other health care accreditation agencies. They ensure that accreditation is not a one-time certification process but a continuous quality enhancement program through the accrediting agencies. Both ISQua and UKAF are international organizations, which assess the accreditation agencies and develop benchmark in health care safety and patient care for hospitals and other related patient care institutes.

5.1 The International Society for Quality in Health Care (ISQua)

ISQua is an independent global umbrella healthcare organization providing accreditation to organizations. It is responsible for assessing and evaluating the standards of international, national and regional assessing agencies to constantly enhance quality and safe patient care, who in turn accredit hospitals and other healthcare institutions. ISQua neither survey nor accredit individual hospitals or clinics by themselves.

5.2 The United Kingdom Akkreditering Forum, (UKAF)

UK Akkreditering Forum Limited is an independent accreditation authority for organizations who accredit healthcare. UK Akkreditering Forum Limited is autonomous, impartial and a pioneer in the field of accreditation and similar to ISQua, UKAF never survey nor accredit hospitals by themselves.

6. ACCREDITATION OF HEALTH CARE INSTITUTIONS – AN INDIAN CONTEXT

To position India as the most preferred medical tourism destination, competitiveness of treatment cost may alone be not enough. As it is the quality of care which is the key differentiator, we require more accredited hospitals to further enhance in the global medical tourism arena. Higher the number of global accredited hospitals a destination has, the better will be its standing in the international medical tourism map. It assists in positioning India as the provider of quality, standard and safe high-end medical care and augments the confidence of global medical travellers about our safe and quality patient care.

6.1 Joint Commission International (JCI)

Currently there are 958 health care institutions in the globe with have JCI Accreditation, which is considered as the premium standard in global patient care and benchmark of global standards on quality, patient confidence and security. JCI is the major, oldest standards-setter and accreditation organization in global health care. It assesses and appraises health care institutions to be world class in delivering safe, efficient and effective patient care. The time line for JCI accreditation is likely to take 12 to 24 months. This includes setting an attainable time frame and communicate the significance of taking a steady, comprehensive approach to accreditation. Organizations undergoing accreditation have to conduct a baseline assessment, gauge the gap between their performance and JCI standards, and refine their policies and procedures to ensure compliance with JCI standards

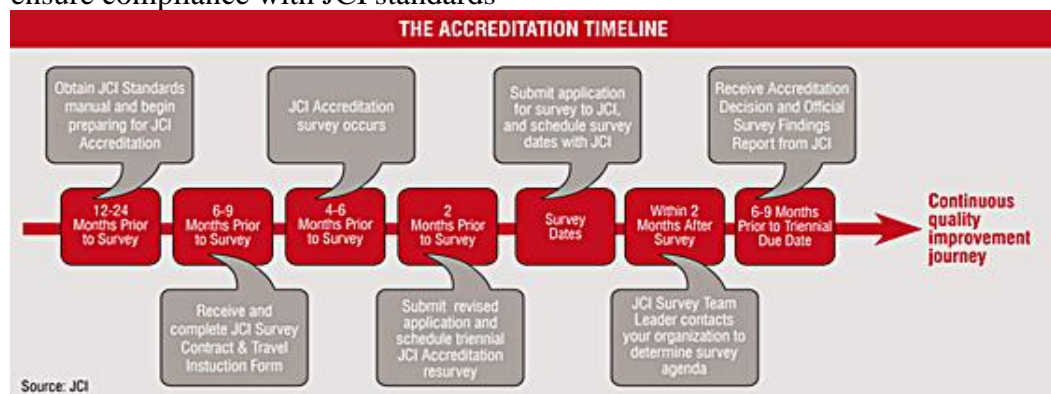


Fig 1. JCI's accreditation time line for hospitals

Source: JCI website

International patients, especially medical tourists, perceive JCI Accreditation as the best ranking in international patient care and as a hallmark of global standards on patient confidence and security. Medical insurance companies across the world rate JCI accreditation as a mandate for its patient cover for treatments abroad. Among the key medical tourist destinations located in Asia, India has the second highest Joint Commission International accredited health institutions.

Table 1. Hospitals with JCI accreditation in the major Asian medical tourism destinations

JCI Accredited hospitals in major Asian medical tourism destinations		
Sl. No.	Medical Destination	No. of JCI accredited hospitals
1	Thailand	60
2	India	35
3	Indonesia	30
4	Malaysia	16
5	South Korea	11
6	Singapore	4
8	Total JCI accredited hospitals worldwide	958

Source : Compiled from Joint Commission International (JCI) website

6.2 Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (ACHS)

ACHS is an independent, non-profit institution committed for augmenting health care quality and is an approved accreditor to Australian and overseas healthcare providers. ACHS is recognized by the International Society for Quality in Health Care (ISQua) for their institutional structure, accreditation procedures and assessor training. Currently 1450 health institutions are globally accredited by ACHS

6.3 Temos International Healthcare Accreditation (TIHA)

Temos Quality Systems and Temos Quality Criteria, developed in 2006, were intended to optimize international patient management in the healthcare facilities across the globe. Their standards of quality are centered on broad research and feedback from multiple sources which comprise of healthcare institutions and global insurance companies. While adopting with accreditation requirements and quality management for international and internal patients, Temos “Excellence in Medical Tourism” accredited organizations are able to cater to the demands of international patients.

6.4 National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers (NABH)

National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers (NABH) was established to launch and activate accreditation programme for Indian healthcare institutions and it is a vital member of Quality Council of India (QCI). It was set up with the purpose of strengthening health care system & maintaining constant quality enhancement, patient care and safety of patients against set standards. NABH provides necessary framework for assurance of quality and improvement for healthcare institutions. These standards necessitate continuous monitoring of sentinel events and suggest comprehensive corrective action plan leading to quality consciousness across

the areas of patient care. Presently there are 716 NABH accredited hospitals in India (NABH 2020)

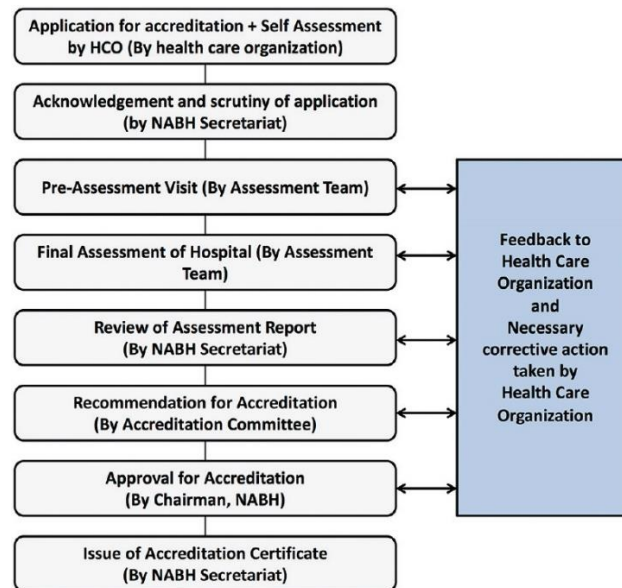


Fig 2: Approval process of health care institutions by NABH

Source : Current Medical Issues Journal, Christian Medial College , Vellore

7. ADVANTAGES OF ACCREDITATION IN MEDICAL TOURISM

In medical tourism, the concept of accreditation assures health care organizations a testimony of independent third party quality assessment against prescribed standards or healthcare criteria, which confirms that international medical tourists are assured of consistent healthcare treatment practices regardless of geographical location of the health care institution where they avail treatment. Majority of medical tourists are risk-averse and accreditation of the health care institutions is perceived as a risk mitigation factor in their cross border treatment decision making.

The process of accreditation envisages surveys and reviews conducted by trained professional peers who use various measures through which concerns, if any, can be diagnosed prospectively, rectified and ensure incessant enhancement. Based on the recommendations that arise from the survey, accreditation process suggests follow-up action for the problems identified and ensure continuous quality. The assessment process is repeated typically between two to four years.

Accreditation envisions several advantages to the health care institutions and to the medical tourists and few of them are highlighted below:

- (a) accreditation persistently improves the quality of the patient care and espouses modern treatment facilities based on the findings and endorsements of the accreditation organizations
- (b) minimizes the risks and inaccuracies related to the treatment and recognizes gaps through appropriate monitoring at different stages

- (c) continuously promotes patient centric policies and standards to augment paramount patient care and satisfaction
- (d) provides a systematic approach towards the working environment of the hospital involving clinical and support staff
- (e) ensures that the patient care and service delivery are designed to deliver better treatment results
- (f) harnesses global standards of excellence in patient centric services to augment the quality and effects of treatment for medical tourists
- (g) guarantees the patient profile privacy and confidentiality of treatment records and
- (h) accreditation can also be used for marketing by health care institutions, medical travel facilitators (MTF) and even by governments of the emerging medical tourism destinations to lure the lucrative medical tourism business and thereby increase international patient inflow.

8. CONCLUSION

Maximization of quality and minimization of associated risks are the twin key constituents for building improved, safer and healthier health care facilities, which could only be accomplished through the accreditation of health care institutions, which necessitates suitable forms of organizational framework designed to quantify the patient care quality, analyze and isolate risks, and mitigate entire concomitant patient care concerns. Global medical tourists perceive accreditation as an attestation of quality or “endorsement of excellence” for ascertaining the genuineness and service excellence offered by the health care institutions catering to medical tourism. Accreditation on global standards ensures that health care institution ascertain rational, prudent standards of practice. Accreditation does not imply that flaws will never ever occur, but it minimizes the chance of occurrence of errors and promotes willingness to learn continuously from them. Accreditation safeguards international patients from the dearth of oversight and guidelines or international laws associated with medical tourism industry, which could otherwise surge the risks associated with overseas treatment.

Globally, accreditation has been perceived as a risk alleviating strategy, a tool for performance judgement, an organization instrument for analyzing strengths and domains for improvement and provides important stakeholders an impartial, unprejudiced external assessment and review. Mounting ageing population, rising treatment costs, increasing pressure for quality assurance and long waiting time for availing treatment in international healthcare landscape will make medical tourism a better option for its important stakeholder - the patient - and accreditation ensures the patient, quality healthcare across the world.

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