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SIZE DOES MATTER

The global pandemic of bulging waistlines could well add to India's medical tourism revenues

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SIZE does matter. With over one billion adults qualifying for the overweight category globally, and 300 million of them obese, it is definitely not a segment that the market would like to ignore. XL people are potential customers for the health and fitness industry, the plus-size apparel segment, the low-fat F&B industry ... And even the airlines. So, if you are flying United Airlines and can't help but infringe on the next seat, you'll either have to book another economy seat or upgrade your ticket to the premium class.

But that's not a problem Betty Frost had to worry about while flying out of India. When the 28-year-old flew in from the UK earlier this year, she weighed 361 pounds. A Sleeve Gastrectomy at Artemis Health Institute in Gurgaon helped her lose 130 pounds post surgery. Thirty-year-old Susan from Ireland too went back lighter by 68 pounds. She weighed 234 pounds when she came to India. Increasing number of medical tourists are heading to India for weight loss or bariatric surgeries including Lap Banding, Sleeve Gastrectomy, Roux-en-Y Gastric Bypass and even cosmetic procedures like tummy tuck in case of non-chronic cases.

Expanding girth

However, the size of the segment is difficult to determine considering that overweight and obesity results in increasing risk of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders especially osteoarthritis and even some cancers. "If you take these into consideration, then the size of the segment is definitely big. But if you take into account just obesity surgeries then it's not more than 10% of the total medical tourism market," says Pradeep Thukral, Executive Director, Indian Medical Travel Association.

Few hospitals have maintained data about the number of medical tourists coming for treatment of diseases that directly or indirectly stem from obesity. "Out of the total number of international patients coming to Artemis Health Institute (AHI), approximately 10% come for weight-related problems, majority of them from the US and the UK," says Dr Sandeep Malhotra, Consultant, Bariatric Surgery, Artemis Health Institute, Gurgaon. Significant, considering that last year AHI got over 2,500 international patients. Dr Malhotra is much optimistic about the future. "Any day, there are about 10,000 potential patients across various countries waiting to undergo various weight-loss surgeries. The potential patients have very little information about the world-class facilities available in India for these weight-loss surgeries and that too at a lesser cost," adds Malhotra who has been witnessing a 5% quarterly increase in international patients seeking assistance for weight-related problems. There are also a substantial number of patients coming in from the Middle East, says Dr Sujeet Jha. The Head, Department of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Obesity, Max Healthcare however feels that "it's in UK and Europe that the real potential lies." Dr Jha has performed



Looking at the scale

As per "Booming Medical Tourism in India", a report released this week, India's share in the global medical tourism industry will climb to around 2.4% by the end of 2012. Moreover, the medical tourism is expected to generate revenue of US\$ 2.4 Billion by 2012, growing at a CAGR of over 27% during 2009-2012. The number of medical tourists is anticipated to grow at a CAGR of over 19% in the forecast period to reach 1.1 million by 2012. There are over 3,000 hospitals and around 726,000 registered practitioners catering to the needs of traditional Indian healthcare.

surgery for super obese, with BMI as high as 170. In one such case he did a Laproscopic Sleeve Gastric followed by a Laproscopic Gastric Bypass in another two years.

Cost 'wise'

Again, it is the cost factor that plays the key role. A weight loss surgery in the US or the UK would be anywhere between three to five times more expensive than in India, says Hari Boolchandani, Head, International Patients Services, Max Healthcare. Max gets close to 3,000 international patients each year and though "very few" of them approach it for weight loss surgery they are trying to popularise this segment. "It forms an important part of our bouquet of offerings for international patients. We have a separate section dedicated to it on our International Patients Services page," says Boolchandani. Medical tourism, a sector relative-

ly resilient to the economic slowdown, seems to have quite a bit to cheer about. "Though small, the sector grew at 25% in the last four years. And if industry projections stand it should register 30-35% growth this fiscal and by 2012 India's medical tourism revenues will cross \$2 bn," points Jaideep Ghosh, Director, KPMG Advisory Services. Obesity surgery will contribute vitally to the growth. "India is becoming a favourite destination for obesity surgery. Quality and cost effective obesity surgery packages in India are attracting people who are on a tight budget, or who are looking to combine obesity surgery with a period of recuperation in a pleasant climate. The Indian surgeons are also coming up with new technologies like gastric imbrication, a technology for Bariatric surgery is likely to reduce the cost of the obesity surgery further," adds Ghosh.

Pros and cons

While India is trying to tap that potential there are advantages and disadvantages to its effect. "One, obesity related surgeries are not covered by insurance. So, clearly the patients would look for cheaper and quality options. On the other hand, obesity as such is not life threatening so people tend to postpone its treatments. Thirdly, international patients go back after obesity surgeries. So, there need to be physicians in their home country to provide post operative care in consultation with their surgeons here. Those relationships are still evolving," explains Thukral.

The bottom line, however, is size does matter. And as Ministry of Tourism begins to promote medical tourism under its Incredible India campaign in Middle East few weeks from now with roadshows, the size will only get bigger — of India's medical tourism industry that is.



PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

Money matters

There is a huge cost benefit of getting obesity surgeries done in India. The surgery costs almost 30% to 70% less here as compared to US and UK, say industry experts.

Average cost for Lap Band surgery in India:
\$6,000 to \$8,000
(US: \$35,000)

Average cost of Gastric bypass in India:
\$9,500 to 11,000
(US: \$35,000)