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Overseas medical tourism: An investment in quality, options and reassurance

While traveling overseas has become something ordinary to many urban Chinese, taking an outbound trip for the purpose of medical treatment is still a relatively novel idea. Such trips are made with the aim, spoken or unspoken, of investing in one's most important asset – health. These investments may not generate immediate returns in dollar value, but are rather made pre-emptively and offer the satisfaction that comes with proactively putting time, money and effort into one's own health.

Other positive gains generated in such investments may include resources and services that are not commonly available in with domestic Chinese medical experience, such as access to higher quality services and more advanced medical equipment.

“Outbound medical travelers are looking for services that guarantee quality, options and reassurance”, commented Mr. Jason Jiang, the founder and CEO of Doctor.U. He further explained that overseas medical tourism is regarded by many of Doctor.U's clients as providing alternative solutions to a number of issues that domestic medical providers are lacking in: “high-end outbound medical tourism involves fewer risks in medical service contracts, and often offers more advanced equipment that are not available or accessible in China. Feedback from our clients shows they consider such trips are safe and reliable with satisfying effects and high-quality services.”

At the same time, Mr. Jiang indicated that such trips need to remain hassle-free and light-hearted in order to reduce the stress, high emotions and solemnity that many Chinese clients would associate with encountering medical staff outside of their usual comfort zone.

The shift in Chinese public attitudes towards outbound medical tourism

The Chinese approach to medical treatment can be encapsulated in the traditional saying that one should “conceal one's ailment and avoid consulting with doctors”. Traditionally in China, sickness is considered to be a private matter that should not be shared or discussed publicly, and seeking treatment with medical professionals is often avoided.

China's rapid economic development and urbanization has provided better access to modern medical facilities and services for greater numbers of its citizens. However, the growing pressure of China's large and ageing population will inevitably pose challenges for the country's medical resources, as well as present opportunities for service providers.

It is therefore not difficult to understand why traveling overseas to receive “optional” medical procedures, such as fertility treatment, cancer screening and plastic surgery, has gained recognition and even popularity among upper-middle class Chinese.

He shared one such experience of an (anonymous) client of Doctor.U's, who took a 12-day fertility treatment trip to California. This female client is in her mid-30's, a typical representation of

Doctor.U's main cohort of clients, who are tend to be aged between 30 and 50 years old. This client and her partner chose to rent a car and stay in a serviced apartment so that they could enjoy an optimal level of flexibility. Abundant pictures and descriptions demonstrated this client's satisfaction in Doctor.U's choice of medical center, the availability of Chinese-speaking staff and the appropriate pacing of the trip.

"We recognize fertility treatment clients' individual needs; therefore, we offer a wide range of destinations to best match their demands. At the same time, we always guarantee engagements with only top medical partners such as those in the United States, Japan, Thailand, Taiwan and Russia."

Mr. Jiang further commented: "Currently the government is encouraging families to have a second child, but according to the China Population Association, 12% to 15% of Chinese people of reproductive age need fertility treatment. Accordingly, there is a large market for both domestic and international service providers. However, it can be a tedious, daunting and emotional process (to receive fertility treatment) for clients, therefore we stand out by making such overseas trips as smooth, pleasant and fun-filled as possible."

An industry lacking in "star" brands

In spite of his general optimism, Mr. Jiang considered there to be many issues that the Chinese outbound medical tour operators need to recognize. Firstly, he believed that the overall supply dedicated to outbound health management is insufficient; in particular, the market is yet to witness an emergence of famous brands that target the high-end market segment.

In addition, adapting overseas medical tourism products to cater to the Chinese market is a time-consuming process. Therefore, the issue of time lags between demand and supply is specifically obvious in this field, which can also be constrained in its flexibility by many social, and even legal factors.

Last but not least, he stressed that destination marketing organizations still need to do more to promote local medical tourism resources to the Chinese market. "Overseas high-end medical projects and products still lack market awareness in China. More intended Chinese travelers are keen to find something that represents the best possible means of maintaining their health."