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Issues and Challenges of Integrative Medical System to the Growth of Health Tourism Industry in Nepal

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Introduction

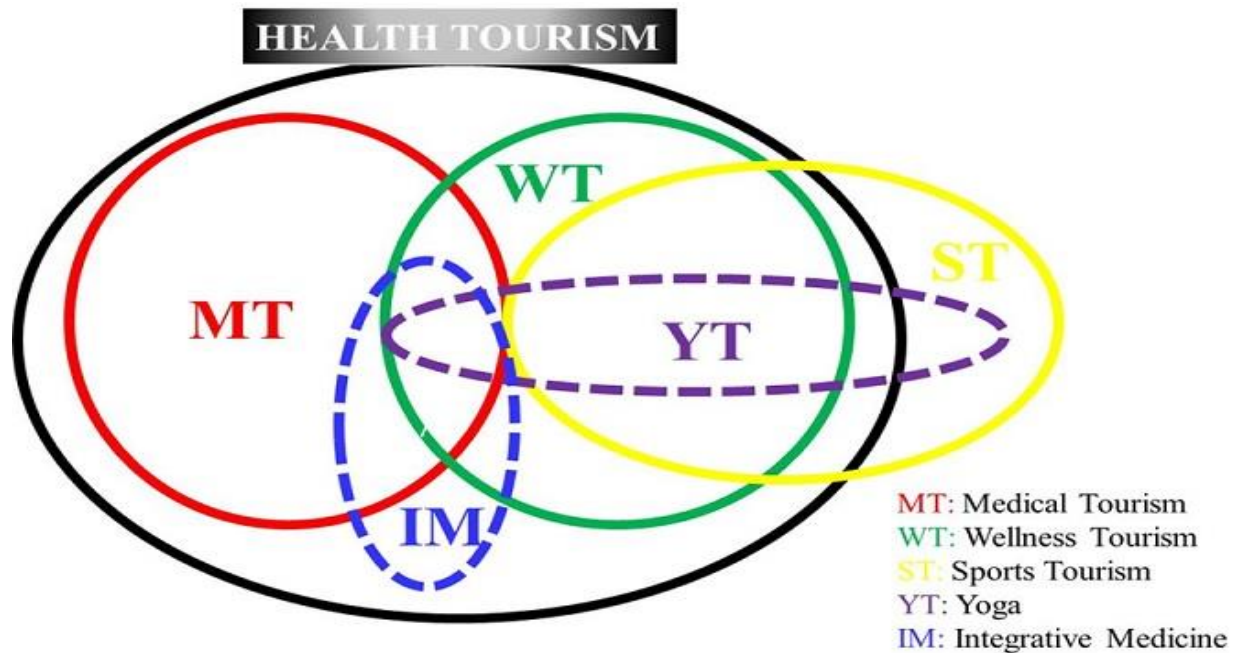
Nepal has the highest mountains on earth. The wisest human beings have always withdrawn into the mountains because a special spiritual strength emanates from them. Nepal's strong wind has caused thousands of medicinal herbs to grow their roots deep in its earth. Over 3500 medicinal herbs are indigenous to Nepal. The mountains and plants, sun, rain and wind contribute to a very high degree of healing energy that resides in Nepal. Nepal in itself is a "place of strength". Today, Ayurveda is a popular form of treatment for many people around the world. Its use is widespread in Nepal, India and Sri Lanka. The value of many Ayurvedic herbs and therapies is now becoming recognized and clinically validated, and there is increasing interest in Ayurvedic systems of healing in the Western world. This is because it is a holistic, natural and effective healing system. It recognizes the individual as unique, as more than only a physical body, and with an inherent healing capacity.

Literature Review

The concept of health tourism was probably first used by the International Union of Tourist Organizations (IUTO), forerunner to UNWTO in 1973. IUTO defined health tourism as "the provision of health facilities utilizing the natural resources of the country, in particular mineral water and climate". The latest UNWTO definition of tourism is "Tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes" (UNWTO, 2001a, Section 2.1)³. Health tourism is defined as travelling to other countries for no less than a day and no more than a year to get the treatment they need to get better (Barca vd., 2013)⁵. The literature refers to medical tourism as the act of travelling to foreign countries to seek 'western-style' medical treatments and procedures (elective surgeries such as cosmetic, dental and plastic surgery as well as specialized surgeries such as knee/hip replacement, cardiac surgery, cancer treatments, fertility, orthopedic therapy etc.). Wellness tourism, on the other hand, refers to authentic or location-based experiences/therapies such as Yoga, Ayurveda, use of local medicines or herbs etc.

The concept of the health tourism as an umbrella term which encompasses medical, wellness and sports tourism, in which the latter targets healthy people and the first those people who need some therapy. Medical Tourism, Wellness Tourism, and Sports Tourism are mainly related with Health Tourism globally. But some countries have their traditional Integrative Medical systems like Ayurveda and Yoga. In the content of Nepal Ayurveda and Yoga based health tourism has high potential. Medical, Wellness, and Ayurveda tourism have common features as well as differences. Nepal, naturally endowed with a rich cultural heritage, tourism potential and reputation for age-old Integrative medicines and therapies such as Ayurveda, Tibetan medicine, homeopathy, naturopathy and yoga is a heaven for health tourism. No previous studies have focused on the issues and challenges of Integrative Medical System to the growth of Health Tourism industry in Nepal on their revisit intention.

Table 1: Concept of Health Tourism



Methodology

A qualitative research method was adopted in this study. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with hospital/Ayurvedic hospital representatives, the executives and directors and other many stakeholders from government and public sector. The key issues were identified through an extensive review of the literature.

Research Questions'

1. Do you see Nepal as Health Tourism center in Asia? Why or Why Not?
2. What are the issues and challenges affecting Nepal in developing its health tourism industry?
3. How can the government support health tourism in terms of promoting it within and outside Nepal?
4. What are the human resource issues related to health tourism development in Nepal?
5. Does Nepal have the facilities and attractions cater for the needs of health tourists?

Results

The term Yoga and Ayurveda Tourism mean the travel for the purpose of promoting health and well-being, physical, psychological or spiritual activities and involving a visit to the destination and its adjacent attractions with enjoying healthy foods. Private healthcare sector of Nepal already engaged in this health tourism industry without any government standards and policy. The country like Nepal is facing the following issues/challenges to become a tourist destination with competent health tourism industry. They are:

1. Lack of infrastructural facilities like lack of connectivity, lack of coordinating system, poor

power supply.

2. Most Nepalese hospitals are also facing the lack of trust from the foreign patients. The hospitals have observed poor hygiene awareness in medical attendants, heterogeneous pricing of services and no industry standards.
3. The government can play a vital part to upgrade the health tourism sector. But the industry is facing the following problems which are caused by the governments. They are: no regulations, taxation anomalies, and bureaucratic roadblocks.
4. The following challenges, due to the infrastructural parts of Health tourism sector in Nepal, are: poor accessibility, lack of capital, lack of Community participation and awareness, lack of involvement from the rural sector, lack of concern for sustainability, complex visa procedures, and poor airport facilities.
5. Apart from these, there are some specific issues to promote Health tourism in Nepal. They are: quality accreditations to the Nepalese health tourism providers and service providers, training and Development to the Doctors, Nurses and Paramedical staffs, and lack of customer oriented approach and promotion.

Conclusion and Discussion

Health tourism has not yet been researched very extensively in Nepal even though it is an important and growing sector. In recent years, health, wellness and medical tourism have grown quickly. This includes visits to Ayurvedic spas, spa and wellness hotels and resorts, Ayurveda and Yoga, hospitals and clinics for surgery and medical procedures, as well as spiritual or holistic retreats. Thus the government authorities are required to check out an effective marketing exercise in branding the country as well as executing marketing strategies in expanding the health and wellness tourism market in Nepal.

The following suggestions laid down the future path for Nepal to attract Health Tourists. These suggestions largely draw from the discussions with various stakeholders as well as observing the other countries' health tourism conditions.

- (1) Research and Development: Health tourism is one of the growing segments in the tourism industry. Research on health tourism and related topics should be done continually in order to obtain up-to-date information about the industry.
- (2) Health Tourism Products and Services: Because of the high competition in the health tourism market, health tourism provider should design the theme for products and services provided to make those products or services different from others. However, each product and service should be developed under the concept of health tourism.
- (3) Public Private Partnership: The government, the health care providers, and the tourism industry have to work together for improvement health tourism industry in Nepal.
- (4) Role of Government
 - (a) Policy, Rules and Regulation. (b) Quality Control and Accreditation. (c) Medical Visas.

A good public private partnership policy, revision of health-related laws, and easing the entry of foreign health practitioners to Nepal could be some steps for the promotion of health tourism in Nepal.

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