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## Medical tourism is a cover up for cheap kidney bazaar

The government of Pakistan has recently adopted a policy to promote medical tourism in the country. It has waived off duties and taxes on import of certain machinery and medicines in support of the tourism industry. But can the country offer any type of medical excellence at economical rates to the foreign visitors? A research by TheNetwork reveals that the country has nothing to offer the world but cheap kidneys. Desperate to earn dollars, the government is ready to sell any thing to foreigners even the kidneys of its poor population. The medical tourism is in fact a label for protecting and promoting trade in human organs. Medical tourism is traveling to some country for some treatment, which is economical compared with one's home country. Many Asian governments are developing medical tourism as industry for the last few years and the experts estimate that it will become a 4 billion dollar industry by 2012 in Asia alone. There can be two attractions for a foreign patient to become a medical tourist in another country. Firstly the health facilities being offered by the host country are economical yet meet international quality standards, secondly the tourism sector of the host country is developed and offers the patient additional attraction of spending vacations there. It does not need an argument to establish that Pakistan neither has world class health facilities nor does it have a developed infrastructure for tourism. In fact whatever tourism industry the country had, has been in crisis since the 9/11 and the subsequent war of terror. Similarly the country's health care infrastructure is in appalling condition. Pakistan spends only 0.5 per cent of GDP on health and a considerable portion of the population is deprived of the basic health facilities. This makes Pakistan a totally unattractive destination for medical tourists. However, Pakistan has some other kind of attractions for medical tourists; the kidney transplantation. Pakistan is among handful of countries where human organ trade is not covered with any legislation and the extreme poverty forces people to sell even their organs. Organ trade is an affront to human dignity and is outlawed or strictly regulated in most of the countries. Pakistan in spite of introducing legislation to check the growing organ trade through law (the bill on human organ transplantation is pending with parliament for the last 15 years) has come up with special incentives for the transplant industry. It has exempted from duty and taxes the import of plant, machinery, equipments for kidney dialysis and transplantation and exempted all duties on the imports of drugs used for kidney dialysis and kidney transplant. These exemptions cost the government a revenue loss of Rs 230 million in the current fiscal only. As the result foreigners are flocking to Pakistan to get a donated or purchased kidney transplanted by spending lesser energy and money on the process, which is otherwise very costly in their own countries. It can take as low as Rs 300,000 (\$5000) to a foreigner to spend on a renal transplant in Pakistan. The lion's share of this amount is pocketed by middlemen, doctors and transplant centers. The so-called donor gets only Rs 50,000-100,000 for selling his or her kidney to an alien patient. In US a kidney transplant normally costs Rs 60 lakh (\$ 100,000) and the patient has to himself seek a donor. The buying and selling of kidneys commodifies human organs. The people who resort to such unethical practices exploit the vulnerable and powerless members of society by treating them as means to an end. By legalizing the transplantation under the beautiful cover of medical tourism, it seems, government has also acknowledged humans as commodities, the organs of whom can be sold and used to earn revenue, especially the foreign exchange.