

The POST

Pakistan's 'medical tourism'

MEDICAL tourism is the act of travelling to other countries to obtain medical, dental and surgical care (either urgent or elective medical procedures). The term was initially coined by travel agencies and the media as a catchall phrase to describe a rapidly growing industry. Pakistan is now taking several measures to initiate a policy facilitating medical tourism, since it is fast becoming a worldwide multibillion dollar industry and offers great promise in generating foreign exchange earnings, cultural harmony and transfer of technology and skills to the country. To promote and facilitate the trade in medical tourism in the country, the government has announced exemption of duties and taxes on the import of certain machinery/equipment and medicines. The industry is currently worth around half a billion dollars a year in Asia and is projected to generate more than \$ 4.4 billion by 2012. In the light of this, for Pakistan to venture into this industry is a good idea – but so far only on paper.

The major problem is the lack of infrastructure. A country where the concept of a sterile medical environment and a proper post-operative system is seemingly non-existent, it would be pointless to initiate a medical tourism policy. Only 0.5 percent of its GDP is spent on health, thereby depriving most of the populace of basic healthcare facilities. Cases of medical negligence and post-operative disasters are the norm in both public and private hospitals. Under such circumstances, allowing medical tourism would be like committing suicide. Pakistan lacks in both quality of health care and number of specialised hospitals of international standard. The local healthcare facilities are not equipped to provide good medical care to any local and/or foreign patients. Where the lives of its own citizens are not safe, endangering the lives of any foreigners could lead to major medical scandals on the international horizon.

Pakistan is known in the international market for its 'organ tourism' and has been dubbed a "cheap kidney bazaar". Debt-ridden Pakistani peasants are the major suppliers, desperate foreign kidney patients are the buyers, and local kidney merchants and unscrupulous surgeons are raking in the cash. According to alarmed experts, about a hundred live kidneys are traded in Lahore "every six to eight weeks", with the bulk of the buyers coming from the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and a few from the US, the UK, Denmark and other European countries as well. The government has admitted the presence of a kidney racket that is not only involved in the illegal practice of selling kidneys, but also performs the transplants without even certifying the antecedents of the donors. Concrete legislation to stop this illegal trade has not materialised yet. Therefore, many people are of the view that a 'medical tourism' policy could be used as a cover to carry out the illegal organ trade.

Medical conditions in today's Pakistan are not promising for medical tourism. If the government is serious about adopting such a policy, it should first address the issues at hand and only then venture forth into this field. More resources must be allocated to the healthcare sector; the local healthcare facilities (be they public or private) should be up to international standards and assurances must be given that no malpractice would take place, which can only be done if strict laws pertaining to malpractice are implemented. Proper medical tourism can only take place if these conditions are met; otherwise its future remains bleak.