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India's medical facilities big hit in UK

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Medical tourism in India is increasingly gaining momentum. About 150,000 foreigners seek treatment in Indian hospitals for non-emergency conditions every year.

According to Taj Medical Group, a knee operation that might cost £10,000 in the UK can be done in India for £4,900, including travel and accommodation. Patients seeking minor surgery combine their treatment with holidays at posh resorts, which are included in the price.

It is a business growing at double-digit rates, worth $300 million (£170 million) annually for India. Taj Hotels is soon to announce a tie-up with Apollo Hospitals, a private medical group, to promote and exploit the soaring demand for cheaper medicine.

BUPA is sending patients to Jaslok hospital in Mumbai, says Colonel Masand, the hospital's director-general. The NHS, however, is proving reluctant. It has denied that it had sent any patients to India or planned to do so but declined to give any explanation for the policy.

However firms like Siemens, sees India as a huge market for its medical technology, worth $1.3 billion and expected to double in size within five years.

It is not only medical tourism but offshore diagnostics that offers huge opportunities for India, says Dhandapany Ragavan of Siemens Medical Solutions. The annual salary of a top radiologist in the US might be $300,000, compared with $20,000 in India. X-ray images are already being sent overnight from the US to be read by Indian radiologists. "It is only a question of time before public institutions send patients to India to reduce healthcare costs," Ragavan says.

At Taj Medical, they are already seeing UK patients that the public service rejects. "The Government has told obese people they will not have operations unless they lose weight, which is a problem if they have hip or knee problems and cannot exercise."

But a spokesman for the NHS says, "patients have a choice of four hospitals and will be treated within six months".