

Health Tourism in Nigeria: Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects for National Development

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ABSTRACT

Health tourism has emerged as a major facet of international healthcare mobility where people have been crossing national borders to seek quality, affordable and specialised healthcare services. The continued growth in outbound medical travel in Nigeria is a manifestation of structural flaws in the local health system, such as infrastructural deterioration, lack of specialised staff, systemic service failures and erosion of citizen confidence. This paper explores the potential and problems and national development opportunities of health tourism in Nigeria. Methodologically, the qualitative research design was adopted and secondary data, in the form of journal articles, books, reports and conference papers, was used to analyse the data so as to determine trends in health mobility in Nigeria. Two important findings are critical. One, outbound medical travel has made Nigeria experience a huge financial leakage to its economy, which exacerbates structural vulnerabilities in the health sector and redirect resources which could be utilized to enhance tertiary health care facilities. Second, notwithstanding these limiting factors, the swift growth of the privatized specialist hospitals, diagnostic centres and wellness establishments testifies to the fact that Nigeria has the structural ability to build a competitive health tourism market which can attract both domestic and regional patients. The paper contends that under consistent policy changes, better regulation, collaboration among the parties, and reinvestment in infrastructure and quality control, health tourism will enhance economic diversification, capital flight, and make Nigeria a new medical centre in West and Central Africa. The paper concludes that the use of health tourism in the national development process would necessitate a long-term commitment, institutional alignment and strategies that would restore the confidence of the population in the local health sector.

Keywords: Health tourism; Medical tourism; Outbound travel; Patient mobility; Wellness tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, health tourism has become one of the rapidly developing areas of cross-border mobility prompted by the rising demand of low-cost, high-quality, and specialized medical services (Hall, 2012; Mathijssen & Dziedzic, 2024). Globalization of healthcare and the spread of private healthcare institutions and transportation has facilitated people to travel to seek surgeries, diagnostics, wellness, rehabilitation, and other alternative treatments. Health tourism has received a new focus in Africa whereby nations are trying to limit outbound migration of medical tourism and are looking to use the sector as an economic growth as well as a boost to their health systems. Due to this, governments and researchers have started to question what forces patient mobility, the consequences of medical travel in the national health systems of the countries and the future whether African states can be competitive in the global health tourism industry (Mandagi & Tappy, 2023).

Health tourism has turned out to be a big social and economic problem in Nigeria. Nigeria is the biggest exporter of outbound medical tourists in Africa as thousands of its citizens are flown into India, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States and South Africa every year to get a variety of treatments (Onyedika-Ugoeze, 2025). These involve cardiovascular, oncological, renal transplant, orthopaedic, advanced diagnostics and cosmetic surgery. The continuous exodus of Nigerians to foreign countries underscores issues of the local health system such as infrastructural deficiency, lack of specialized personnel, inconsistent service delivery, and lack of trust by the citizens in the local health services. Past research estimates indicate that the country is losing billions of naira every year to outbound medical travel- funds that would go a long way in enhancing the local hospitals had it not been taken by these travellers (Orekoya & Oduyoye, 2018; Orji et al., 2020). The latter renders the research of health tourism not just topical, but also pressing on the national developmental scale. Nonetheless, Nigeria has a lot of potentials to create a feasible health tourism industry that can help the country attract both domestic and international clients. The country is experiencing a booming and fast-growing private health sector, rising investments in diagnostics and special care, and rising middle income with the need to access high-quality medical services.

This paper is thus an analysis of the opportunities, challenges and prospects of health tourism in Nigeria with a special emphasis on its role in the development of Nigeria. It is intended to add to the existing knowledge base on health mobility by informing those who may be concerned about the policies and practices in performing studies on the health economy and investors who may be interested in enhancing the role that Nigeria plays in the world economy.

2. METHODS

The research design used in this study was qualitative in order to understand the dynamics, challenges, and prospects of the health tourism in Nigeria. The design provided a detailed exploration of contextual elements that influence health-related mobility. The research was based solely on secondary sources, which were peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, reports and conference proceedings of institutions. These sources were been chosen specifically for their relevance, credibility and their role in contributing to the current discussions on health tourism and healthcare systems. Thematic analysis was used as an analytical model, and it helped in finding common patterns, concepts and themes within the documents. Through this process, the study was able to cluster findings into broad thematic areas like drivers of outbound medical travel, systemic constraints in the health sector of Nigeria, the proliferation of private medical institutions and the overall opportunities of creating a viable health-tourism market within Nigeria. Data obtained were discussed in themes.

3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

3.1 HEALTH TOURISM: CONCEPTS, TYPOLOGIES AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Health tourism is a loose and dynamic concept, but is influenced by the convergence of medical services delivery, mobility, and worldwide quest of quality medical services. Ideally, health tourism is the movement of people across regional or international boundaries in pursuit of medical, wellness or therapeutic services they perceive to be of the highest quality, less expensive or more accessible than those services available in their home country. It is broadly split into two large categories, that is, medical tourism and wellness tourism. Medical tourism is the travel of clinical or surgical treatments of type cardiac care, organ transplants, orthopaedic surgery, fertility treatment, oncology services, and high level of diagnostics (Quintela et al, 2016). Wellness tourism, however, involves preventive care, alternative medicine, spa, rehabilitation, mental health retreat and other well-being oriented services. In the context of Nigeria, health tourism is mainly viewed as outbound medical tourism but a domestic and regional market in some wellness services is emerging.

The difference between inbound and outbound health tourism is important in realizing the role of Nigeria in the global health economy. The term outbound health tourism is used to refer to the relocation of Nigerians to other destinations in search of healthcare due to the dissatisfaction with the quality of services in their local countries, high specialization of treatment, the supposed superior quality in other countries or to the effect of the social networking that promotes the quality of treatments in other countries. Inbound health tourism is the influx of foreign patients to Nigeria seeking treatment but this is still rudimentary because of infrastructural loopholes, safety perception, as well as asymmetrical quality assurance systems. Patient mobility is another concept, which has been joined to represent the social, economical and cultural conditions which influence the reasons and ways of accessing care beyond their immediate context (Hall, 2012). Such theoretical differences give a basis to the investigation of the drivers and inhibitors of health tourism in Nigeria (Adebayo et al., 2025).

The theoretical foundations of the health tourism research have frequently been based on the models which attempt to explain how people choose health care decisions under the conditions of uncertainty, scarcity of resources, or perceived risk. The Push-Pull Theory of Tourism, which elucidates the influences of negative conditions at the home environment (push factors) and favourable aspects in foreign medical destinations (pull factors) on mobility is one perspective that is frequently employed (Dean & Surhantanto, 2019). The push factors in the case of Nigeria are poor health facilities in the country, lack of medical experts, delays, and unreliable service delivery. Pull factors are the presence of modern technology in foreign countries, internationally recognised hospitals, reduced treatment prices in such countries as India, and travel-care packages offered by medical tourism organisations. This framework can be used to shed some light on why outbound medical travel is still common even though more funds are being invested in the health sector in Nigeria. The other helpful model is the Health Belief Model (HBM) that seeks to determine the impact of perceptions of risk benefits and barriers on the health-seeking behaviour of individuals (Limbu et al., 2022). According to the model, Nigerians who believe that their local healthcare is risky or insufficient, and that foreign healthcare not only has more benefits or guarantees, but also present the highest chance, tend to travel more. Another important factor that is used in the HBM to determine decision is the social influence, the perceived severity of illness, and expected outcomes. Despite being traditionally applied in the research of public health, the model also is very close to the modern analysis of health tourism, especially where the level of trust in the local health system is low.

These theoretical and conceptual approaches offer an analytical perspective of health tourism dynamics in Nigeria when they are combined. They shed light on how the vulnerabilities of the health

system structure, risk perceptions at an individual level, global healthcare inequalities, and market-based influences, interrelate to influence medical traveling patterns. It is necessary to develop such a conceptual base to evaluate the possibilities that the sector offers, the issues it entails, and its implications on the development of a country on a bigger scale.

3.2 OVERVIEW OF HEALTH TOURISM IN NIGERIA

The development of health tourism in Nigeria has a history that dates back to a few decades, influenced by the colonial history of medical provision in the country, the post-independence development of the national health sector, and the further development of investment by the private sector. In Nigeria, historically, complex medical conditions of the Nigerians depended on the teaching hospitals and regional centres of specialists which were put in place in the 1960s and 1970s (Scott-Emuakpor, 2010). The University College Hospital (UCH) in Ibadan, the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), and the National Orthopaedic Hospitals would have regional status and receive patients in the neighbouring West African states. These initial decades were a time when Nigeria had the initial capacity to establish a competitive health sector. Nevertheless, economic crises of the 1980s, structural adjustment policies, years of underinvestment and migration of healthcare workers led to slow deterioration of the quality of care provided by the public hospitals (Orubuloye & Oni, 1996; Thompson & Ololade, 2025). The local health system started losing popularity, and more and more Nigerians started seeking specialized services outside the country, which is now seen as the initial stage of what is currently known as outbound medical tourism.

Health tourism has become a characteristic of the health environment in modern Nigeria, whereby there is a constant influx of patients seeking medical diagnosis, surgery, fertility treatment, oncology treatment and organ transplantation overseas. The relatively low prices, internationally recognised hospitals and a huge supply of specialist doctors have made India the most favoured destination (Balogun, 2020). High-income Nigerians, who are in the need of advanced treatment or second opinion, also visit the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Turkey and the United States (Isa, 2025). These locations have created strong medical tourism sectors whose customized services such as visa services, accommodation packages, linguistic services, and coordinated medical services, are attractive to the Nigerian patients. The economic effect is even more serious: medical travel takes away billions of naira each year out of the country, which is a loss of money and a loss of chances at strengthening health structures in their home countries. The internal environment, however, has started changing with the growth of the number of private healthcare facilities and the rise in investments towards high-tech diagnostic centres. In the last twenty years, there has been an expansion of specialist hospitals in Nigeria that deal with cardiology, neurosurgery, renal care, orthopaedics, fertility treatment and cosmetic surgery (Okafor, 2016). Privately managed hospitals like those in Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Ibadan have now developed in these cities and have invested in the most modern medical technologies and are even seeking international accreditation. This is a new trend which can be seen as a developing effort by the local institutions to counter outbound medical travel by providing similar services locally. The availability of advanced investigations has also been enhanced by facilities of diagnostic hubs that have MRI scanners, CT machines, and molecular laboratories. However, these services are still concentrated in urban centres strengthening regional health inequalities and restricting national accessibility.

Meanwhile, wellness tourism has become popular as the population of the Nigerians who resort to other forms of care instead of traditional hospitals has been growing. In a wellness ecosystem that is not strictly regulated, wellness spas, physiotherapy clinics, weight-loss centres, mental health retreats, herbal therapy centres, and faith-based healing centres are a significant component. Although this

sector is not receiving a lot of foreign visitors at the moment, it is serving millions of Nigerians who seek therapeutic, preventive, or spiritual treatments. The booming nature of the wellness market means that there is a wider movement in the society towards holistic health seeking behaviour. Nevertheless, lack of standard regulation, accreditation and safety guidelines curtail its capacity to make any significant contribution to the health tourism profile of Nigeria (Nwodo & Ikpawho, 2025).

The other aspect that influences the Nigerian health tourism industry is the place of intermediaries such as medical travel agencies, health brokers and internet that have connected patients with the foreign hospitals (Epundu et al., 2017). These middlemen make travel arrangements, bookings to hospitals and financial provisions and in most cases, affect the attitude of patients about foreign care. They have expanded their operations tremendously due to the rising need of the reliable information on the medical services abroad. However, lack of regulation controls subject patients to misinformation, financial abuse, and unnecessary travelling to seek procedures that can be safely done in Nigeria. Though it is not yet major inbound medical tourists' destination, there is a possibility of the country, Nigeria, becoming that. Nigerian facilities are increasingly being visited by a small but increasing number of patients in neighbouring countries especially West and Central African countries seeking diagnostic services, fertility treatment as well as emergency care. The initial reason behind this emerging trend is the fact that Nigeria is geographically large, has good air transport connections, and the presence of experts that can hardly be found in other countries.

3.3 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN HEALTH TOURISM

i. A set of systemic, structural, and institutional challenges which inhibit the standard of healthcare provision and minimise the appeal of Nigeria to both national and international patients restrains development of a competitive health tourism sector in Nigeria. All these challenges are decades old and indicative of more fundamental problems in the governance, funding, and administration of the health system. The failure of medical infrastructure in most of the country is one of the most outstanding issues. Most public hospitals work under conditions of outdated equipment, unreliable power supply, inadequate amount of beds, and poor conditions of the facilities (Abubakar et al., 2018). These infrastructural shortfalls influence primary, secondary as well as tertiary health institutions and severely diminish the ability of hospitals to deliver the kind of specialist services that medical tourism needs. The scarcity of high-quality diagnostic equipment, surgery, and highly developed care services adds to the mistrust of patients and supports the desire to seek treatment in other countries.

ii. Another critical issue is the lack of specialized medical staff in such critical areas as neurosurgery, oncology, cardiology, nephrology, and critical care (Abubakar et al., 2018). Nigeria still faces a mass drain of health workers to Europe, North America as well as the Middle East. This gradual migration decreases the supply of professionals to carry out complicated practices and adds to the long queues in specialized care. There is a critical lack of specialists especially in rural and semi-urban locations, where most of the health facilities are ill equipped to offer even the simplest services of the specialists. The resulting unequal spread of expertise defines the existence of huge inequality in healthcare provision and failure to achieve centres of excellence to underpin health tourism.

iii. Furthermore, the lack of confidence in the Nigerian health system by people, is yet another problematic issue. Trust is an important factor that may influence people to pursue medical services locally or internationally. According to many Nigerians foreign hospitals are seen to be more reliable, transparent, and efficient. Such an impression has been supported by the high-profile cases of medical errors and misdiagnosis in the local hospitals and frequent reports of equipment breakdowns, prolonged

waiting times, and mishandling of patients. Another hindrance to the development of health tourism is weak regulatory frameworks. There is frequent inconsistency in the enforcement of quality standards, accreditation of health facilities, monitoring of patient outcomes and certification of medical personnel. Even though Nigeria has a number of regulatory bodies, there is a lack of coordination between them. This flaw has enabled certain facilities to work below the international benchmarks of the hygiene, safety and clinical governance. It also lacks stringent control of the wellness tourism industry where herbal therapy centres, spas, and alternative medicine providers are often allowed to operate without any standardisation guideline or quality control. Such regulatory loopholes are one of the reasons behind the inconsistency of service quality in the country and weakening the competitiveness of Nigeria in the international health market (Adeoye, 2023). Financial limitations in financing health also contribute a lot in restricting the growth of health tourism.

iv. Security issues are another threat that influences the appeal of Nigeria in health tourism. The continued cases of terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery, and civil unrest in different regions of the country would pose a risk perception to potential international patients (Umeakuka, 2022). Insecurity also impacts on inter-state and regional travel even to the domestic patients thus complicating access to major health facilities. Nigeria has a reputation of insecurity, corruption and political instability which usually characterize the international picture of the country.

Nigeria has enormous and untapped potentials of developing a strong health tourism industry despite the numerous challenges that the health sector has been facing. The large and fast-growing population of Nigeria is one of the most significant opportunities that will create a sizeable domestic market of specialized healthcare services. Nigeria is a country with a population of more than 200 million and consequently, a vast pool of patients with varying health needs including chronic illnesses and state-of-the-art surgical procedures. The growing proportion of non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular illness, cancer, renal and diabetes) has put pressure on the need to provide specialized care, which has provided a motivation to establish centres of excellence in the country. With proper support, these centres would be able to accommodate both local patients and those in the neighbouring states who would need localised high quality but affordable treatment options.

Another opportunity is based on the growth in private healthcare. In the last twenty years, the level of investment in high-tech medical technologies and the modernization of the facility has been actively developed in private hospitals, diagnostic centres, and specialist clinics (Amedari & Ejidike, 2021). Some of the private facilities in cities like Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Ibadan have also procured modern imaging facilities, developed cardiology and fertility departments and sought international standards of best practices. The developments have attracted Nigerians who were once travelling to some of the procedures specifically the minimally invasive surgery, IVF treatments and advanced diagnostics (Bakare et al., 2024). Further growth of the private sector with relevant regulatory stimulation can make Nigeria one of the leading countries in the region in terms of medical experience. This potential is further enhanced with the increasing involvement of the diaspora medical professionals, most of whom visit on a regular basis to perform special procedures and thereby exchange knowledge and skills.

The other emerging opportunity is in the area of wellness tourism. The cultural heritage and traditional medicine system, natural views, and an increasing desire to explore holistic wellbeing are factors in Nigeria that provide room to develop health and wellness retreat programs. Be it the wellness

sector from the conventional herbal therapy and physiotherapy services, the spa resorts and mental health sanctuaries can have a chance to attract domestic service users and processively target foreign clients. Even though it is at the moment disorganized and less governed, this market holds potential in creating employment opportunities, cultural marketing, and diversification of the domestic tourism business.

4. CONCLUSION

Health tourism is a huge but underutilized potential in the national development of Nigeria. Despite the systematic healthcare issues the country may still experience (poor infrastructure, lack of medical experts, etc.), the rising need of the quality healthcare services among the Nigerian population and the necessity to increase the global mobility of the patients prove that health tourism may become the valid form of economic and social development. The potential of the sector is not just by being able to reverse the high number of medical tourists, but also to establish Nigeria as a hub in the region which can draw West and Central African patients. Nigeria has a large population, diverse medical needs and the growing sector of the private health sector, and a strategic geographic location, thus has a number of comparative advantages that can be used with the help of the coordinated policy interventions.

This paper has demonstrated that the prevailing situation in health tourism in Nigeria is a twofold reality. On the one hand, the nation is facing a huge financial burden as a result of outbound medical travel that consumes foreign exchange and even shows the vulnerabilities of the domestic health system. Conversely, the new domestic innovations in specialist medicine, biotechnology, telemedicine, wellness, and rehabilitation suggest that Nigeria can develop high quality services that will match international standards. The trends show that health tourism is not just an issue of the health sector but a cross-cutting developmental issue that cuts across tourism, investment, infrastructure, education and management of foreign exchange.

The way ahead of Nigeria depends on the formation of a clear policy and institutional framework that will facilitate the growth of competitive health tourism in the country. It will be essential to strengthen the healthcare infrastructure, modernize regulatory institutions and develop incentives that would attract investment. It is also essential to encourage the public-private cooperation, diaspora mobilization, and the regionalism of the collaboration that would facilitate the improvement of service provision and increase the nationwide presence as a medical tourism destination. In addition to reforms in policies, raising the level of patient trust, clinical quality and matching local standards with international ones are some key measures that should be taken to rebrand the health sector as a driver of economic diversification.

Finally, health tourism provides the country with a way of changing its health system, generating jobs, boosting foreign investment, and curbing capital flight. It can be used to advance the overall objectives of sustainable development when developed in the right way and enhances better health outcomes, human capital and inclusive economic growth. The future of health tourism in Nigeria is therefore pegged on strategic commitment, long term investment and a common vision among the policy makers, health professionals, those who invest in it and the communities. Through prudent effort, Nigeria has the opportunity to turn health tourism into a strategic economic sector in the country.

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