

Does Accreditation result in more patients?

By Elizabeth Ziemba, JD, MPH, President, Medical Tourism Training

Healthcare providers often ask if obtaining accreditation will attract more patients. It is a valid question. Accreditation involves expenditure of money and healthcare budgets are under a lot of pressure. Decision makers want to know if spending money on accreditation will result in more patients seeking their services.



The answer to the question is a very lawyerly – it depends. The question behind this question may be “Will putting the accreditation ‘Seal of Approval’ on our website attract more patients?” If the healthcare provider does nothing more than promote the Seal of Approval, chances are very high that it will not be enough, by itself, to motivate patients. There does not appear to be a one on one correlation between the two factors.

Accreditation + ?? = More Patients

To attract patients, more than this type of passive thinking is needed. If there is not a direct link between accreditation and increased patient volume, then how does accreditation contribute to growing numbers of patients?

The link between accreditation and quality of care



A literature review does not provide evidence of accreditation being a factor that drives patients’ decision making in selecting providers. There does not appear to be a straight line connecting accreditation to more patients. There is a **connection, however** between **accreditation** and the **quality** of healthcare, and patients are most definitely looking for excellent clinical care.

Accreditation + Leadership = Improved Quality

There is “...consistent evidence that shows that accreditation programs improve the process of care provided by healthcare services. There is considerable evidence to show that *accreditation programs improve clinical outcomes of a wide spectrum of clinical conditions.*”^{i ii iii iv} With this clear connection between **accreditation** and **outcomes**, is there a related connection between clinical outcomes and increased patient volumes?

The links among accreditation, quality of care, and patients

In addition to employers and insurance companies, there are three generally accepted personal referral sources in medical travel: Medical Tourism Facilitators; doctors or medical professionals; and patients (medical travelers). Here is what the research offers to support the connection among accreditation, outcomes, and patient numbers.



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Medical Tourism Facilitators (MTF) often view international and/or national accreditation as a surrogate or proxy for judging quality and prefer referring patients to accredited hospitals and clinics.

In fact, “**international accreditation**” and “**quality of care (e.g. surgical outcomes, nurse-patient ratio)**” are considered **pull factors** that encourage MTF to contract with those accredited providers.^v This preference by MTF demonstrates one link between clinical outcomes and patient referrals.

The referral patterns and processes of physicians are much more complex. A general physician may refer a patient to a specialist because of professional or personal relationships, insurance and contractual requirements, or other reasons. Physicians do not want to make referrals to unqualified doctors, hospitals or clinics that offer substandard care.

Accreditation will reassure a physician, or influence her decision when referring a patient to go out of the patient’s home country. We know that most physicians are risk-averse, and accreditation can be seen as a risk mitigation factor for the patient seeking treatment abroad. If a medical traveler is searching for the “best” specialist in the world, the reputation, knowledge and experience of a particular doctor may outweigh any consideration of accreditation. Such a specialist may or may not provide services in an accredited hospital or clinic.



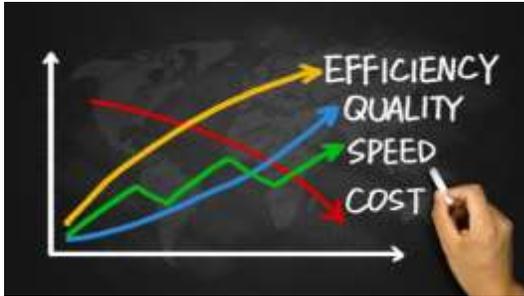
Like physicians, medical tourists consider a number of factors when selecting a destination for healthcare. Those patients working with Medical Tourism Facilitators rely on the recommendation of those agents who in turn prefer accredited healthcare providers. When deciding for themselves, prospective medical tourists utilize four sources (1) professionals including facilitators; (2) word of mouth; (3) advertisements including social media; and (4) news and other similar sources of information.^{vi}

Research confirms that accreditation is important in three of the four areas: facilitators, advertising which often contains prominent displays of the seal of accreditation, and news/information about the provider. Being an accredited healthcare provider is a positive factor for medical tourists.

Medical tourists may not yet have the sophistication to say that accreditation is a proxy for quality the way many medical tourism facilitators do but *prospective patients do recognize and look for messages about quality of care*. And as research demonstrates, accreditation can improve the quality of care.

Accreditation + leadership + quality of care = more patients

Actress Lauren Bacall said, “Standing still is the fastest way of moving backwards in a rapidly changing world”. International medical travel is changing and evolving quickly. International and national accreditation standards are growing.



Accreditation is gaining momentum as one way to improve the clinical and non-clinical aspects of patient care. For example, in 2008, one of the most popular accreditation programs had accredited 242 organizations in 35 countries.^{vii} As of February 2018, there are more than 1,038 healthcare providers accredited globally by this organization.^{viii} Other accrediting organizations add to the total numbers on a worldwide basis. This market growth

demonstrates that the leadership teams within providers see value in accreditation.

Healthcare providers find value in accreditation, and the leadership within healthcare organizations uses accreditation to improve quality, increase efficiency, and reduce costs, all of which improve the patient experience. Accreditation has a positive impact on the quality of care and providers are attracting more patients by leveraging high standards of care achieved in part through the accreditation process.

Accreditation can increase the number of patients

To answer the question, “Does accreditation result in more patients?” the answer is yes, if the accreditation process is one among many steps in continuous quality improvement. And of course the quality message must be communicated to potential patients, medical tourism facilitators, colleagues and referral sources, through websites, social media, and other forms of communication.



Accreditation does not guarantee that more patients will automatically appear. Accreditation plus excellent leadership resulting in continuous improvement in the quality of care should drive increased numbers of patients.

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^{viii} <https://www.jointcommissioninternational.org/about-jci/jci-accredited-organizations/>, accessed 10 February 2018.