



Analysis Of Overseas Medical Services Quality In The Decision-Making Process Of Medan City Residents For Seeking Treatment Abroad Post-Covid-19 Pandemic

Widya Anisa¹, Ida Yustina², R. Kintoko Rochadi³

¹Master Student, Faculty of Public Health, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

^{2,3}Faculty of Public Health, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
Email: widyaanissa863@gmail.com

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes in global healthcare services, with a notable decrease in the number of individuals seeking treatment abroad due to the pandemic. However, as travel restrictions have eased and borders have reopened, there has been a significant increase in overseas medical travel post-pandemic. The quality of medical services abroad offers high-quality healthcare, including access to the latest technology, reliable medical expertise, shorter waiting times, and high safety standards. This study aims to analyze the perceptions of Medan City

residents regarding the quality of overseas medical services in their decision-making process for seeking medical treatment abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study methodology and was conducted in Medan City from February to March 2024. The informants in this study were six residents of Medan City who sought medical treatment abroad after the COVID-19 pandemic, selected through purposive sampling. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis was performed interactively through three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results revealed an increased demand for overseas medical treatment post-pandemic, despite changing opinions on the quality of overseas medical services. Factors influencing the decision-making of Medan City residents included healthcare technology, doctors' competence, and nurses' competence. It is recommended that hospitals in Medan City provide training in healthcare technology to enhance doctors' and nurses' abilities in diagnosis, treatment, and patient care. Additionally, hospitals in Medan City are encouraged to implement punctuality standards for doctors and nurses in patient examinations to improve service quality.

Keywords: Medical services quality, decision-making, COVID-19

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Introduction

Medical treatment-seeking behavior is the effort made by individuals to find appropriate treatment when they consider themselves to have a health disorder (Waumans et al., 2022; Noh et al., 2022). In Indonesia, medical treatment-seeking behavior is categorized into three types, one of which is seeking medical treatment (Lolong et al., 2021; Sucahyo et al., 2024). Medical treatment is administered by healthcare professionals or individuals with medical knowledge and expertise (Bukan et al., 2020).

Indonesian citizens engage in medical treatment-seeking behavior even abroad. Data from the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) indicates a continuous increase in the number of Indonesia seeking treatment in Malaysia from 2016 to 2019, with 921,000 visits in 2016, 1,050,000 visits in 2017, 1,200,000 visits in 2018, and 1,220,000 visits in 2019. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Indonesia seeking medical treatment in Malaysia drastically decreased for two consecutive years, with 689,000 visits in 2020 and 561,000 visits in 2021 (Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council, 2022).

The decrease in the number of Indonesia seeking medical treatment abroad was due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the international travel restrictions implemented by the Indonesian government on March 2, 2020 (Kementerian Kominfo Republik Indonesia, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant changes in the global healthcare landscape. Healthcare systems in many countries faced immense pressure due to the surge in cases and resource limitations (Kosaka et al., 2021). This situation led to delays in providing medical services and a general decline in service quality (Mosazadeh et al., 2022). Additionally, travel restrictions and lockdowns limited access to cross-border healthcare (Folinas et al., 2021; Terefe et al., 2023).

With the easing of travel restrictions and the reopening of borders, the trend of medical tourism is expected to increase significantly post-pandemic (Sankowski, 2021; Saenko et al., 2022). Medical tourism refers to individuals traveling to other countries primarily to receive medical care, whether for elective procedures or specialized treatments (Wen et al., 2021; Ratnasari et al., 2022).

North Sumatra is one of the provinces in Indonesia with significant opportunities to utilize healthcare services abroad due to its northern land border with Malaysia and Singapore (Dinas Kominfo Provinsi Sumatera Utara, 2023). According to data from the Special Class I Immigration Office at TPI Medan, through the immigration checkpoint at Kualanamu Airport, the number of passengers traveling abroad from January to May 2023 reached 375,982, with 40 percent seeking medical treatment. Therefore, the number of North Sumatra residents seeking medical treatment abroad up to May 2023 was 150,392 (Imigrasi Kelas I Khusus TPI Medan, 2023).

Medan city, the capital city of North Sumatra, has contributed significantly to the number of individuals seeking medical treatment abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic. As of June 2023, approximately 120,000 residents of Medan have sought medical treatment overseas (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara, 2023).



One of the main driving factors of medical tourism is the public perception of the quality of medical services abroad (Chia & Liao, 2021; Ratnasari et al., 2022). Several countries have become popular destinations for medical tourism due to their reputations for offering high-quality healthcare at more affordable costs (Chaulagain et al., 2021; Abdul-Rahman et al., 2023). Factors such as access to the latest technology, reliable medical expertise, shorter waiting times, and high safety standards are often primary considerations for patients when choosing a healthcare destination abroad (Wang et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges in accessing information about overseas medical care and in the travel process itself (Filip et al., 2022). Although travel restrictions and lockdowns temporarily limited access to cross-border healthcare during the pandemic, there are indications that the demand for medical tourism has increased as restrictions have eased (Lee & Lee, 2021; Pool, 2023). This increased demand for overseas medical treatment post-pandemic is evident in Medan, where some residents opt for treatment abroad due to perceptions of better service quality and shorter waiting times.

This study aims to analyze the perceptions of Medan residents regarding the quality of medical services abroad in their decision-making process for seeking medical treatment overseas post-COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

This study will employ a qualitative approach using a case study method to explore the experiences and perceptions of Medan City residents in seeking medical treatment abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic. The research will be conducted in Medan City, chosen due to a significant increase in passport applications for medical travel post-pandemic, from 66 applicants in 2021 to 3,185 applicants in 2022 according to data from the Special Class I Immigration Office TPI Medan. The study will take place from February to March 2024. The informants for this study will consist of six residents of Medan City who sought medical treatment abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic, selected using purposive sampling. The purposive sampling technique will be used to select informants who meet the following criteria: 1) residents of Medan City, 2) have sought medical treatment abroad after March 2020, and 3) are willing to be interviewed. Data collection methods will include in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation.

In-depth interviews will be conducted using a recorder, with an interview guide developed to explore topics such as reasons for seeking medical treatment abroad, perceptions of the quality of medical services, experiences during the treatment process, and factors influencing decision-making. Data analysis in this study will use the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) model, where qualitative data analysis is performed interactively through three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

The principal investigator has received an ethical approval certificate from the Health Research Ethics Committee of University of Sumatera Utara (No: 100/KEPK/USU/2024). Additionally, permission from academic administrators and relevant authorities was obtained



before data collection, aiming to acquire informed consent from respondents before distributing the questionnaires.

Results and Discussion

Healthcare technology influences the decision-making of Medan City residents in seeking medical treatment abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the interview results, the majority of informants indicated that there is no significant difference between healthcare technology in Medan hospitals and hospitals abroad. This is illustrated by the following interview excerpts:

"According to me, the technology in the hospitals I have visited here is the same as the technology abroad." (Informant 1)

"It's the same as here, there's no difference, but I don't know why the diagnosis results and the medication given are different." (Informant 2)

"The technology seems to be the same, but maybe it's the utilization that's different. Here, for example, if we want to check one problem, the results might not be ready for a day or two. But over there, it's quick. If we come in the morning, the results are ready by the afternoon. So, we feel satisfied." (Informant 3)

"It seems there are many similarities, but in Malacca, they brought the equipment to the room. Regarding the equipment, the ring that was installed during my surgery here, the doctor there said it was too small and shouldn't have been used again. But indeed, I felt pain with the ring installed here." (Informant 4)

The interview excerpts above illustrate that while the healthcare technology in hospitals in Medan is comparable to that in foreign hospitals, the utilization of this technology differs significantly. Informant 3 emphasized that the utilization of healthcare technology in foreign hospitals is more efficient, as evidenced by the ability to provide quick diagnostic results. If a patient undergoes a health test in the morning, the results can be available by the afternoon. In contrast, in Medan hospitals, it takes several days to receive health test results.

The utilization of healthcare technology is further highlighted by informants' statements regarding the availability of better alternative treatment methods in foreign hospitals. This is supported by the following interview excerpts:

"I think it is much more advanced there; even the treatment methods are different. To remove the remaining fetus, they didn't have to perform abdominal surgery, but just a uterine cleansing procedure." (Informant 5)

"In terms of treatment methods, they indeed offer better alternatives for my condition. Here, I was advised to undergo a hysterectomy, but when I went to Penang, they only needed to remove the fibroid. After returning, I was able to conceive the following year." (Informant 6)

In the case of Informant 5, it is explained that residual tissue from a miscarriage resulted in the retention of fetal remains in the uterus. When seeking treatment at a hospital in Medan, the recommended method for removing the fetal remains was an abdominal surgery. However, at Island Hospital in Penang, the treatment method used was a uterine cleansing procedure. Similarly,



Informant 6, who suffered from fibroids, was advised to undergo a hysterectomy at a hospital in Medan. Conversely, at Lam Wah Ee Hospital in Penang, the recommended treatment was a simple fibroid removal surgery.

In these cases, the alternative treatment options provided by foreign hospitals were significantly more advantageous for both informants. Foreign hospitals thoroughly examine the patient's condition and consider potential risks before deciding on a treatment method. The difference in treatment methods led the informants to prefer seeking medical services abroad. This aligns with Article 336 of Undang-Undang No. 17 Tahun 2023, which states that all research, development, evaluation, and utilization of healthcare technology must consider the potential risks and benefits to public health.

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the superior utilization of healthcare technology in foreign hospitals significantly influences the decision-making of Medan City residents to seek medical treatment abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are consistent with the study by Damayanti et al. (2021), which showed that Indonesians, particularly those from Sumatra and Java, seek treatment in Malaysia because Malaysian hospitals use advanced medical equipment to treat patients, especially foreign patients. The study by Pulungan (2021), also demonstrated that the more advanced healthcare technology in hospitals in Penang, Malaysia, influences the decision-making of Medan City residents to seek treatment in Penang.

Gremler et al. (2017), explain that healthcare technology is a component of physical evidence, which is one of the dimensions used to assess the quality of healthcare services. Physical evidence refers to the ability of a service to demonstrate its existence to external parties. This capability serves as tangible proof of the services provided by the service provider.

The capability of doctors influences the decision-making of Medan City residents in seeking medical treatment abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, the capability of doctors refers to respondents' opinions on the services provided by doctors in addressing patients' health issues during their hospital stay.

Based on the interview results, several evaluations of the quality of doctors' capabilities in foreign hospitals were identified. These evaluations encompass appearance, punctuality, diagnostic accuracy, provision of clear and comprehensible information, communication, safety, competence, and the friendliness of doctors.

The assessment of doctors' diagnostic accuracy becomes the primary reason why informants opt to purchase medical treatment services abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic. This is evident in the following interviews:

"The doctor here said the left side is already clean, but it seems there's still something on the right side, then I was told to come back in three months by the doctor here, but I didn't return. I went straight for a check-up in Penang, and turns out, during the check-up in Penang, everything was clean, there was nothing." (Informant 1)

"I don't know, but from my experience, the doctors here tend to scare people. When I checked here, the doctor said, 'this is already cancer, we need to perform surgery right away,' and they immediately prepared the surgery letter. Whereas, when I



checked with the doctor there, they said, 'it's nothing serious, just a growth, you can go home first to think about it, if you want it removed, we'll do it.' (Informant 3)

"In the past, I encountered two doctors here who said I had fibroids, but when I consulted with a doctor in one of the hospitals here, it turned out it wasn't fibroids, but residual fetal tissue." (Informant 5)

The interview excerpts above illustrate that foreign doctors are more proficient in accurately diagnosing patients' illnesses compared to doctors domestically. The foreign doctors' ability to diagnose diseases accurately serves as the basis for the informants' assessment of the higher quality of foreign hospitals. Informant 3 also mentioned that when diagnosing illnesses and deciding on treatment methods, patients are allowed time to consider before undergoing surgery. This is supported by statements from other informants, as depicted in the following interview excerpts:

"The doctors there already suggest what should be done without us having to say anything. Unlike here, where if we seek treatment, it's just this or that, the doctor doesn't suggest anything else. Moreover, they handle it quickly, without delay. The way the doctors convey information there doesn't make us worried, so we feel comfortable with the doctors there." (Informant 1)

"I can't deny that the doctors there have good abilities, perhaps because they don't confine themselves to just one thing. We're consulted everywhere, so it's good. Their way of working is already known, everything is researched beforehand." (Informant 6)

The interview excerpts above also indicate that before making treatment decisions, doctors provide alternative treatment options and explain the potential risks. This aligns with Article 293 of Undang-Undang No. 17 Tahun 2023, which stipulates that every individual healthcare procedure performed by a doctor must be done with the patient's consent after the patient receives adequate explanations regarding the diagnosis, indications, procedures to be performed, potential risks, alternative options, risks of not undergoing the procedure, and prognosis after receiving the treatment.

Communication between doctors and patients during treatment also serves as a trigger for residents of Kota Medan to seek medical treatment services abroad post-COVID-19 pandemic. Doctors in hospitals must have communication skills in handling their patients. They should be able to instill in patients the belief that they will recover. This is evident in the following interview excerpts:

"The way the doctors convey information there doesn't make us worried, so we feel comfortable with the doctors there." (Informant 1)

"I feel the difference between the doctors there and here. We can't ask many questions to the doctors here, but there, it's okay to ask many questions. Moreover, the information provided is clear and easily understood." (Informant 2)

"The way the doctors communicate there really makes us feel comfortable and cared for." (Informant 3)



"The doctors there make us feel motivated to recover. When I was being treated there, the doctor was about to leave, but he made time to come into my room and ask about my condition, whether I still felt any pain or not. And even at night, around 11 o'clock, the doctor asked again if there was still any pain. So, it's the way the doctor communicates, their friendliness, and attitude that make me comfortable receiving treatment there." (Informant 5)

"In terms of doctor-patient communication, I happen to have found one that suits me, but I don't know about others. My doctor is welcoming, easy to talk to, and the discussion is pleasant. Whatever we ask, they answer, and especially the results they provide are not as extreme as here. So, we just trust the views of the doctors there." (Informant 6)

The interview excerpts above explain that during communication, doctors provide information about the disease clearly and comprehensibly, making patients feel more comfortable, cared for, less worried about the illness, and instilling a sense of determination to fight the disease. Informants 2 and 6 also added that if there is unclear or difficult-to-understand information, patients can ask many questions about the disease, and the doctor will answer whatever the patient asks.

Another reason is the belief among informants that foreign doctors have good appearance, punctuality, and friendliness. This is evident in the following interview excerpts:

"Even though the doctor's appearance is casual, wearing jeans, but very friendly, always comes to check on us frequently." (Informant 3)

"The doctors there, thank God, serve us without feeling superior just because they're doctors. My child met a doctor in the elevator, asked about the tube I used, and the doctor immediately came to my room after performing surgery with another patient. Unlike our doctors here, they seem arrogant once they're doctors. So, the doctors there always connect with their patients, friendly even outside the treatment room. The doctor who treated me had a very good and handsome appearance. And if, for example, my leg suddenly hurts, it's not the nurse who does something, but the doctor immediately comes to handle it. So, the doctors there are on standby at the hospital from 8 am to late afternoon." (Informant 4)

The interview excerpts above explain that doctors abroad are not arrogant, always engage with patients, are consistently punctual in checking on conditions, and are on standby at the hospital from morning to evening, so they immediately respond in case of emergency situations with patients. Informants also noted that doctors maintain a good and handsome appearance despite appearing casual.

Doctors are medical professionals with knowledge and skills to diagnose, treat, and cure various diseases, as well as provide advice and treatment to patients (Undang-Undang No. 17 Tahun 2023).



Doctors are one of the main components in hospitals and play a crucial role in providing healthcare services directly to the community. Hospitals as service providers can be considered of high quality if doctors have the ability to provide excellent service to the public (Yusuf, 2021).

This research is in line with studies conducted by Santoso et al. (2020), which explain that the competence of medical personnel is one of the factors driving the community's decision to seek medical care in Malaysia. The study also indicates that medical personnel in Malaysia are always willing to provide deeper attention to patients' complaints. Research by Purwatiningsih et al. (2017), also states that the determinant factor in the increase of patients seeking treatment abroad, especially in Singapore and Malaysia, is the friendly and communicative attitude of doctors.

The nursing capability influences the decision-making of the residents of Kota Medan to purchase medical treatment services abroad post the COVID-19 pandemic. The nursing capability referred to in this study is the respondents' opinions regarding the services provided by nurses in addressing patients' health issues during hospitalization. Based on the interview results, several assessments were obtained regarding the quality of nursing capabilities in foreign hospitals perceived by the informants. These assessments include punctuality, providing easy and clear information, communication, friendliness, and demeanor of the nurses. The respondents' responses regarding the nursing capabilities in foreign hospitals in this study varied. This is consistent with the following interview excerpts:

"When I feel the capability of the nurses there is better, we are directed there by the nurses. For example, when we want to check up, the nurse accompanies us, then picks us up again when we're ready for the examination, and then directs us to the next step. The nurses there also work quickly and efficiently." (Informant 1)

"The nurses there don't chat around; they are all busy with their work. I feel it's different from here." (Informant 2)

"The nurses there are also good, always punctual in checking our condition and meals." (Informant 3)

Based on the interview excerpts above, informants stated that the nursing capabilities in foreign hospitals are better because the nurses are always prompt in assisting and guiding them during the examination process, they quickly respond when called, and they are always punctual in checking the patients' condition and meals. Informant 2 also added that the nurses' attitude during work involves less chatting with colleagues and more focus on their tasks.

Nurses, in performing their roles, must also understand and possess good and proper communication skills (Asmirajanti et al., 2021). Based on the interview results, communication by nurses in foreign hospitals is also excellent. Informants mentioned that nurses in foreign hospitals explain procedures clearly and comprehensively beforehand. Nurses in foreign hospitals are also capable of answering all patient inquiries effectively, although there are informants who experienced slight communication barriers due to language differences. This is evident in the following interview excerpts:



"When it comes to communication with nurses, it depends on us, but I feel comfortable communicating with the nurses there, and during treatment, the nurses explain in detail what will be done, and if asked, their answers are pleasant." (Informant 1)

"With nurses, maybe because of the language difference in different countries, sometimes it gets a bit confusing. But in terms of service, attention, and kindness, the nurses there are friendly. It's just communication that's a bit challenging due to the language difference. Nurses there and here are the same, good from my experience." (Informant 5)

"The nurses are good, they care about what we need, and there are no language barriers because they use Malay, similar to Indonesian, so communication with the nurses is smooth." (Informant 6)

Informant 5 explained that language differences posed a challenge when listening to explanations from nurses, requiring the informant to pay close attention to what the nurse explained and occasionally ask the nurse to repeat their explanation for better understanding. Nevertheless, Informant 5 still stated that nurses in foreign hospitals provide good service, attention, and friendliness. This is supported by statements from other informants, as depicted in the following interview excerpts:

"The nurses are also friendly. I was a bit tired from walking a lot, so my blood pressure went up, but the nurse didn't let me walk, she pushed me everywhere, insisting that I rest a lot, and she checked on me every hour." (Informant 3)

"In terms of nursing capabilities, in terms of friendliness, I think it's better here, the nurses here are friendlier, while the nurses there are more indifferent, no small talk. Most of the nurses there are from the Philippines and Thailand. For example, when I was treated here, in the morning, they already helped us wash up, but not there, our family has to do it. But in terms of job competency, the nurses there are good, they come when called, especially if called in the middle of the night, they respond quickly." (Informant 4)

Based on the interview excerpts above, both informants explain that the service provided by nurses in foreign hospitals is good, but there is a difference of opinion regarding the friendliness of the nurses. Informant 4 states that in terms of friendliness, nurses at Medan City Hospital are friendlier compared to those at Mahkota Malacca Hospital. This is because the nurses working at Mahkota Malacca Hospital come from the Philippines and Thailand, leading to cultural differences with Indonesia.

Law number 17 of 2023 explains that besides medical personnel, the leadership element in hospitals includes healthcare personnel. Healthcare personnel are grouped into 12 categories, one of which is nursing personnel. Nursing personnel include vocational nurses, nurses, and specialist nurses (Undang-Undang No. 17 Tahun 2023). Hospitals, as providers of healthcare services, in their efforts to maintain quality, cannot be separated from the nursing capabilities that must ensure the provision of high-quality nursing care. Patient welfare would be compromised without nurses



because nurses are the primary and longest-standing contact with patients, considering that nursing care is continuous 24 hours a day (Aulia et al., 2023).

The results of this study are consistent with the research conducted by Sirait, et al. (2020), regarding the decision of the Karo Ethnic group to seek healthcare services in Penang, Malaysia. The research explains that the ability of nurses to provide good, friendly, and communicative services, as well as to provide explanations until patients fully understand, is one of the influencing factors in the Karo Ethnic group's decision to seek healthcare services in Penang, Malaysia.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the quality of medical services influences decision-making, including healthcare technology, doctor competence, and nurse competence. Healthcare technology has an impact because the utilization of healthcare technology in foreign hospitals is superior, thus providing rapid examination results and offering more beneficial alternative treatment methods. Doctor competence matters because foreign doctors are assessed to have better quality in terms of appearance, punctuality, diagnostic accuracy, information provision, communication, safety, competence, and friendliness. Nurse competence is also influential because nurses in foreign countries are perceived to have better quality in terms of punctuality, information provision, communication, friendliness, and attitude.

Recommendations that can be provided in this study include hospitals in Medan City are encouraged to conduct healthcare technology training to enhance the competence of doctors and nurses in diagnosing, treating, and caring for patients. Hospitals in Medan City are expected to implement doctor and nurse punctuality in examining patients to improve service quality. Hospitals in Medan City are encouraged to conduct effective communication training to enhance the ability of doctors and nurses to provide clear, understandable medical information and to answer patients' questions politely and accurately.

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