

# Malaysian Medical Tourism: Weathering the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has imposed significant and unprecedented impacts in various sectors worldwide. Due to containment measures, the international tourism sector was expected to contract between 45 and 70 percent in just the first half of 2020. Similarly, the health sector is severely affected by the shortage of workforce and hospital capacity. There is also a vast concern on balancing public and private health in light of public interest. Correspondingly, the global medical tourism worth USD87.5 million annually before the pandemic is expected to shrink until at least the end of 2021. As for Malaysia, healthcare travel was expected to earn revenue of MYR2 billion by 2020. However, the plan had to be put on hold due to the current unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) saw a significant drop in revenues by nearly 70 percent. In Malaysia, international health travelers who had been doing treatments, such as oncology, had to pause and resort to advanced drugs not available in their home country. These circumstances thus become the main driving force for medical tourism destination countries and industry players to weather the storm. Hence, this article attempts to understand the impacts of the pandemic on Malaysian medical tourism. Additionally, this article elucidates the current measures taken by industry players in comparison with other countries. This study analyses documents from various sources, including reports by international organisations, newspapers, and journal articles. With the assistance of ATLAS.ti version 9, thematic analysis was conducted, allowing the authors to arrive at emerging themes. Findings show that Malaysia has a fluctuated outlook on health tourism despite the government recognising the industry as a priority export service with a strong potential rebound.

Since the beginning of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in 2020, health tourism is expected to rebound by the end of 2021. On the one hand, the government has supported health tourism by allocating MYR 35 million in Budget 2021. On the other hand, given the current Delta variant and spiking new COVID-19 cases when this article is written, the industry is expected to brace for more significant impacts. Thus, the two major counteractive actions by MHTC are seen through technological adaptation of medical services and memorandum of understanding (MOU) with international health committees and hospitals. Mainly, technological adaptation is evident through telemedicine services, including DoctorOnCall' which allows doctors and hospitals to be in the loop of their patients' conditions worldwide. Moving forward, more stakeholders are expected to onboard telemedicine platforms in providing continuous services to medical travelers. Hence, this article contributes to the narratives of Malaysian medical tourism during COVID-19. Findings from this study offer an in-depth understanding of the adoption of technology as a short-term corrective measure in keeping up with continuous services for international patients during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, Malaysia, Medical Tourism, Telemedicine*