NEW DELHI, India: A new report released by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) proposes the establishment of interdisciplinary health centres in major cities to meet the increasing influx of medical tourists. According to the paper, the total number of foreigners seeking medical or dental treatment in the country is expected to reach 5.2 million by 2015.

The estimates are a sharp increase from the current 590,000 tourists that contribute approximately US$980 million in revenues to India’s booming healthcare industry, which competes with Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore for the lucrative medical tourism market in South-East Asia. Competition has also recently emerged from countries like the Philippines which have launched campaigns to attract more patients from regions like the Middle East, North America and Europe.

“High quality medical care at a fraction of the price people would traditionally pay in developed countries is the basic reason behind this surge of patients flocking to India for treatment purposes,” said D.S. Rawat, Secretary General of the ASSOCHAM. “High costs of medical treatments in these countries have compelled patients to seek alternative, cost-effective and lucrative destinations.”

In order to meet demand, the country needs to set up multi-speciality hospitals in public-private partnerships that offer quality medical and dental treatment by highly trained English-speaking professionals, Rawat stated. He called on government to offer financial concessions for the health-care industry that could help to create more jobs in the industry and lure back Indian doctors who currently work abroad.

According to the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs estimates, there are over 1 million health professionals worldwide with Indian origins. Healthcare business consultant Vivek Shukla, New Delhi, said that the government would have to revise visa norms and offer better legal support for international patients. Infrastructure in the recommended cities will also have to be reviewed as some do have very little or no international flights, he said.