

Consultation fees of Indian doctors: the myth demystified

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Abstract

Background: Medical expenses are an inevitable part of human life and often perceived seriously by all walks of life. With emerging epidemics and other diseases, this takes the center stage, in terms of quality, the expense involved, and risk parameters. In India there is a popular belief that Indian doctors charge high consultation fees. The present study aims to analyze this assumption with facts and figures, considering allopathy practitioners in India.

Methods: The practicing doctors have been categorized into 3 strata such as general practitioners (MBBS), specialists (MD/MS) and subspecialists (MD/MS with additional qualifications). A survey on the consultation fees charged by individual practitioners at selected Indian cities and BRICS countries has been made. Further, mean values of the consultation fees of each category of the doctors are compared with ordinary saloons, 5 star saloons, SPAs and the price of popular burger brands and Coca-Cola across the selected cities in India and BIRCS countries.

Results: The comparison of the consultation fees of Indian doctors with their counterparts in other BRICS countries has confirmed lowest fees being charged by Indian doctors. On comparison, hair-cut charges for men at ordinary saloons were found to be on par to 48-66% of the consultation fees of different types of doctors whereas the hair-cut charges at 5star saloons and SPAs surpassed doctors' consultation fees up to levels of 130% and 201% respectively. Similarly, consultation fees of Indian doctors can be equated with 3-4 burgers and 5 to 7 Coca-Cola bottles in India. The same comparison made in other BRICS countries have revealed their fees to be equivalent to >20 bottles of Coca-Cola.

Conclusion: Indian doctors charge the lowest consultation fees among the BRICS countries. The general assumption of high consultation fees being charged by Indian doctors, is far from reality, on the basis of the factors analysed. Interestingly, most of the cost analysis studies on healthcare in India are focused on public spending and the patients' affordability aspects. The consultation fee of private doctors is never valued in terms of quality of service provided by private doctors in comparison with that of the public health system.

Keywords: General practitioners, Specialists, Subspecialists, Consultation fees, BRICS countries, Saloons .

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I. Introduction

Medical expenses are an inevitable part of human life and often considered seriously by all walks of life, both in terms of quality and cost. Evidence on public health spending in India on healthcare is low and hence spending by people on their own is reported as more than four times to that of the government spending^{1,2}. This makes the public thinking and perception of healthcare services as a whole and consultation fees of doctors, in particular, more biased with inclination on the patients' spending capacity. Therefore, an analysis of healthcare spending from the perspective of the Doctor community is needed for getting a better and holistic picture of the economic perspective of the healthcare system in India. The current survey has been carried out with the objective of analyzing the cost incurred by the doctors in terms of their consultation fees in the private sector.

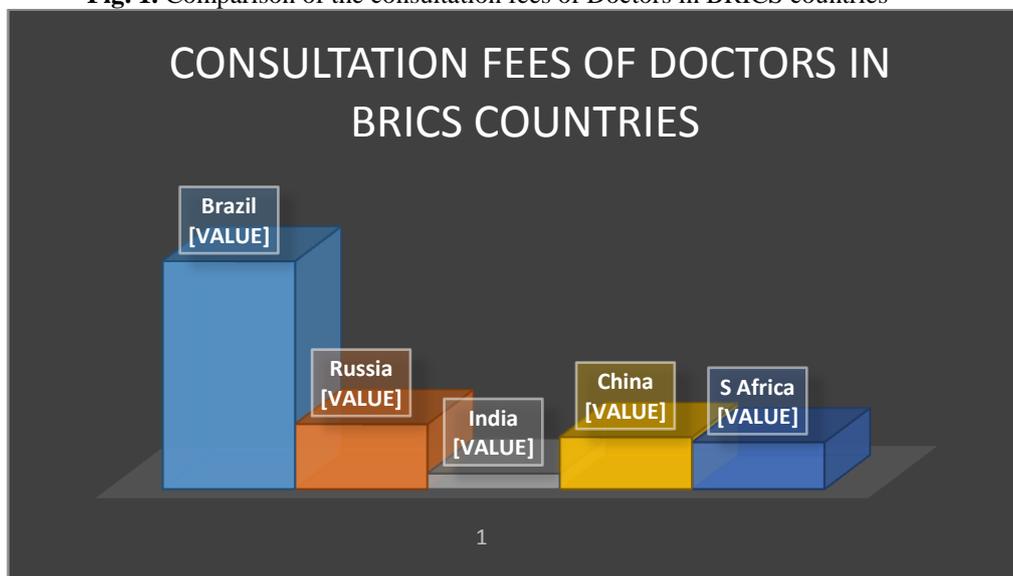
II. Methods

Doctors are categorized into 3 strata such as general practitioners (MBBS), specialists (MD/MS) and subspecialists (MD/MS with additional qualifications) and a survey on the consultation fees charged by individual practitioners at selected Indian cities and BRICS countries has been made. Further, mean values of the consultation fees of each category of the doctors are compared with ordinary saloons, 5-star saloons, SPAs and the price of popular burger brands and Coca-Cola across the selected cities in India and BIRCS countries for valuing their consultation fees against common other basic personal services like hair-cutting and with those of the popular fast food items. Mean of the fees charged by individual categories of Doctors was calculated from information available in the public domain and compared with means of hair-cutting charges in three types of saloons like the ordinary saloon, 5-star saloon, and SPA at 6 major cities of India such as Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, Kolkata, and Delhi.

III. Results

The consultation fees of Indian doctors when compared with those of other BRICS countries (Fig.1), the former recorded the lowest value, with Brazil>Russia>China>South Africa>India in the descending order. Interestingly, the mean consultation fees charged by Indian Doctors are one-third of the next higher value among the BRICS countries.

Fig. 1. Comparison of the consultation fees of Doctors in BRICS countries^{3,4,5,6,7}



Values are means of fees of all categories of doctors (i.e. general practitioners, specialists, and subspecialists) in INRs.

Table 1 compares the mean consultation fees of Indian doctors with the cost of hair-cutting service offered at different types of saloons for men. The values in parentheses indicate how much percentage the doctors’ fees are for the hair-cutting service. In fact, hair-cut at the SPA costs more than double the fees charged by a general practitioner and near to double to that of specialist doctors.

Table 1. Comparison of consultation fees of Indian Doctors^{3,4,5,6,7} with hair cut fees at Men’s saloons and SPA in India^{8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,}

Types of Doctors	Consultation fees (in INR)	Ordinary saloon fees (in INR)	5 Star saloon fees	SPA fees
	Mean	Mean(% of Doctors’ fees)	Mean(% of Doctors’ fees)	Mean(% of Doctors’ fees)
General practitioner (MBBS)	521.88	347.14 (66.57)	734.21 (140.68)	1051.25 (201.43)
Specialist (MD/MS)	562.88	347.14 (61.67)	734.21 (130.43)	1051.25 (186.76)
Subspecialist (MD/MS + specialization)	715.00	347.14 (48.55)	734.21 (102.68)	1051.25 (147.02)

In another attempt value of the consultation fees of Indian doctors is compared with prices of popular fast food items like the burgers and Coca-Cola. The doctors’ fees are converted to the number of pieces of the food items (Table 2). Accordingly, fees of a general practitioner are equated to 3 to 3.5 burgers and 5 bottles of Coca-Cola. The figures are not much different in the case of specialist and subspecialist doctors (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of popular fast food item prices with consultation fees of Indian Doctors^{16,18,19}

Types of Doctors	Consultation fees (in INR)	McDonald Burgers	KFC Burger	Coca-Cola*
	Mean	Mean (Nos equivalent to Doctors’ fees)	Mean (Nos equivalent to Doctors’ fees)	Mean (Nos equivalent to Doctors’ fees)
General practitioner (MBBS)	521.88	148.5 (3.5)	153.33 (3.4)	100.00 (5.2)
Specialist (MD/MS)	562.88	148.5	153.33	100.00

		(3.8)	(3.67)	(5.6)
Subspecialist (MD/MS + specialization)	715.00	148.5 (4.8)	153.33 (4.67)	100.00 (7.1)

*per 2Lpack

Table 3 compares the mean consultation fees of doctors in BRICS countries with that of the price of Coca-Cola in respective places. The figures indicate the lowest number of bottles equated to the fees of Indian doctors in comparison with other countries.

Table 3. Comparison of Coca-Cola prices with consultation fees of Doctors in BRICS countries^{16,17}

Countries	Consultation fees (in INR)	Coca-Cola*
	Mean	Mean (Nos equivalent to Doctors' fees)
Brazil	8775	97 (90.46)
Russia	2500	102 (24.5)
India	600	100.00 (7.1)
China	2250	87.00 (25.86)
South Africa	1800	82.00 (21.95)

*per 2Lpack

IV. Discussion

Patient safety and affordability are the key rulers of the healthcare system. As far as the safety of the patients is concerned, accessibility and availability of timely treatment are the crucial factors. Affordability is often over projected in Indian context while analyzing the healthcare system, particularly with reference to the private healthcare professionals and the facilities. While considering the practical aspects of the public-private divide on healthcare service in India the major point to note is the quality of the service offered by the two sectors. The quality of healthcare service in the public healthcare system is comparatively poorer to that of the private sector in India as reported by several studies^{19,20,21}. Prices of drugs have been identified as the major factor contributing towards the cost enhancement of healthcare²² service in India, which is overlooked in most of the analyses. The context is well illustrated by the concept of “70:70 paradox”, which refers to the condition in which 70 percent of healthcare cost is being borne by the patients, of which 70% accounts for the cost of medicines²³. The consultation fees of the private doctors, in fact, acts as a marginal factor in the whole healthcare service expenditure from the patients’ perspective, but gets over-amplified in the public perception. This needs to be valued in terms of the quality of the healthcare service in the private sector, which is again not being projected in many of the cost analysis studies.

V. Conclusion

Indian doctors charge the lowest consultation fees among the BRICS countries. The current study has established that the general assumption of high consultation fees being charged by Indian doctors is far from reality. Another interesting fact is that the cost analysis studies on healthcare in India are more focused on public spending and the patients’ affordability. The consultation fee is never valued in terms of quality of service provided by private doctors in comparison with that of the public health system.

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