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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bali Medical Journal (*Bali Med J*) 2017, Volume 6, Number 2: 268-278
P-ISSN.2089-1180, E-ISSN.2302-2914

Published by DiscoverSys

A systematic review of factors influencing healthcare services marketing in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Health services marketing is an integrated approach which consists of marketing principles based on scientific strategies mainly focus on health promotion and service recipients' satisfaction through ensuring the congruence between customers' needs and service provided features. In this systematic review study, we aimed to explore affecting factors on healthcare marketing in Iran. For this purpose, Pub Med, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Iranian databases such as SID, Iran Medex, Magiran, and Iran Doc were searched using relevant search terms linking healthcare marketing and associated factors for literature published from 2008 to 2016. After reviewing 968 records, 24 studies met inclusion criteria; among which the greatest number focused on appropriate communication between service providers and patients, quality of provided services, lower costs, service availability, credibility and continuity, quality of physical facilities and convenience as significant factors affecting healthcare marketing in Iran. Although a considerable amount of research has been done in this area, each focusing on a particular issue, this review tried to bring various research findings together. Due to the inadequate attention paid to health marketing principles in Iran health sector, many care providers are not able to benefit from related advantages. Therefore identification of influencing factors and strengthening them can take important steps in this regard.

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Received: 2017-03-08
Accepted: 2017-04-27
Published: 2017-05-1

Keywords: Healthcare marketing, health services marketing, influencing factors, Iran.
Cite this Article: Yaghoubi, M., Rafiei, S., Khosravizadeh, O., Mirbahaeddin, E., Jalilvand, M., Sarkhosh, S., Ranjbar, M. 2017. A systematic review of factors influencing healthcare services marketing in Iran. *Bali Medical Journal* 6(2): 268-278. DOI: 10.15562/bmj.v6i2.536

INTRODUCTION

In early 1980, the competition began to make significant changes in healthcare. Many healthcare institutions found that in order to survive in such a dynamic environment, they should apply marketing principles based on scientific strategies to satisfy their care recipients and keep them strongly committed.[1] Since then, marketing departments were established in many healthcare organizations to assess the market, care recipients, and their needs or motivations. Health service marketing is an integrated approach which consists of marketing techniques mainly focus on health promotion and patients' satisfaction through ensuring the congruence between customers' needs and service provided features.[2] The main reasons for advocating the emergence of healthcare marketing were mentioned to be building public awareness toward provided services, enhancement of reputation regarding the healthcare organizations, influencing customers' decision making to choose particular services, and sustaining in a competitive market.[3] Literature confirmed a set of variables contributing to marketing which potentially affect the target market. The most relevant ones were mentioned product, price, place, and promotion.[4] Application of these four Ps gradually was replaced with more appropriate models in healthcare. Relevance through knowing consumers and providing their interests, respond to brand expectations, effective relationship with consumers and achievement of considerable market share were among important factors to apply in healthcare marketing.[5] Booms and Bitner (1981) suggested a more comprehensive model for marketing which consisted seven variables; the four Ps added with people, process, and physical evidence. In fact, marketing mainly depends on responding to care recipients' demands for health services which require consideration of many factors on services' utilization.[6] Consumers' satisfaction with health services was dependent on the extent to which their expectations were met. Tangibility, reliability, accuracy, assurance, and empathy were among factors which patients mainly focused on for evaluating service quality.[7] Provision of better health services through emphasizing on the quality of healthcare practices can lead to loyal and committed customers for the institutions. Psychological factors, communication, caring, empathy, and personality factors were also mentioned as other important issues.[8]

Many research has been done worldwide in the area of health marketing which all implied

the significant issue. A study conducted in Brazil to investigate the impact of culture on health marketing, research in Uganda emphasizing on the role of quality, a comparative review in Sweden about health marketing principles, and an investigation in the field of Japanese supply centers were among significant literature.[9-12] Some similar studies were also done to examine affecting factors on healthcare marketing in Iran.[13-16] Competition, growing number of assertive care recipients with a dramatic increase in their literacy rate emphasized the importance of identification health marketing factors to promote them toward strengthening strategies in moving forward and managing existing challenges in the field. To gather various research findings and cover the existing gap in scientific evidence about affecting factors in health marketing, we conducted a systematic review.

METHODS

Eligibility criteria

This systematic review was done and structured on the basis of PRISMA statement. Health services marketing was defined as an integrated approach which mainly focused on service recipients' satisfaction and health promotion through ensuring the quality of provided services.[1,2] Study types (including reviews and original research) that were conducted in Iran and were published in both English and Persian which assessed influencing factors on healthcare marketing were included in the review. As previous reviews had determined, few marketing factors in healthcare and lack of integrated evidence existed in the study field specifically in Iran. Thus we aimed to concentrate our findings to this country.

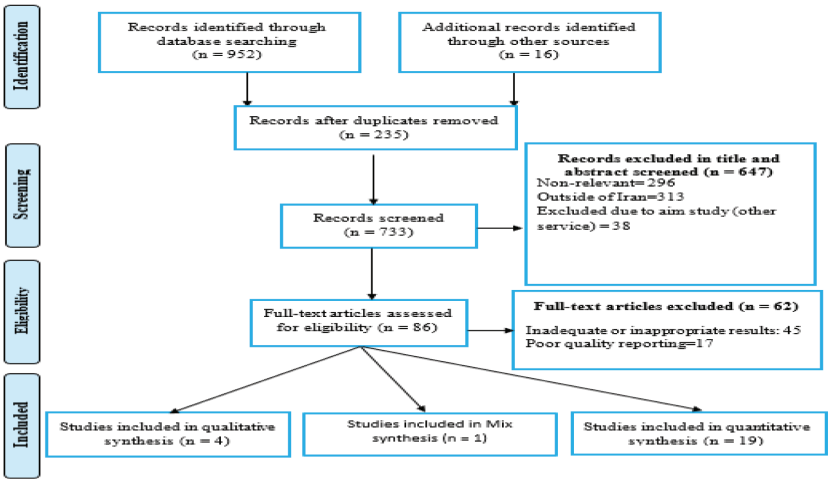

Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Chart of Study Selection.

Search Strategy

We searched peer-reviewed studies published in databases of Google Scholar, Pub Med, and Scopus in addition to Persian ones including Iran Medex, Magiran, Iran Doc, and SID from 2008 to 2016. Search terms included health promotion, health service marketing, market building, advertising, and communication in combination with following terms: health, healthcare, medical care, hospital, and Iran. After duplications had been removed, two researchers screened remaining abstracts according to relevancy, study type and accessibility to full text. Those studies which examined marketing concept in areas other than health or in countries other than Iran were excluded from the consequent review. First of all, search in each database was done through reviewing titles and abstracts; so that all abstracts which included search keywords were selected. Then the articles were screened with the aim of finding the most relevant ones while duplicates were also removed. Finally, abstracts and full texts were examined through consideration of inclusion criteria. The evaluation and organization process of titles for abstracts were done by reference manager software (EndNote X6).

Selection of Studies

Search findings were entered into Endnote reference manager software, and duplicates were omitted automatically. Titles and abstracts were assessed by two researchers independently. Full texts related to study references which were potentially eligible to be included were reviewed and assessed based on defined criteria. Any disagreement between reviewers was resolved, and reasons for study exclusion at this stage were reported.

Quality Assessment

As evidence from a systematic review depends on the appropriateness of included studies, we ascertained the quality of literature through assessment tools relevant to each study design. Some of the most important criteria which have been focused to be checked were: eligibility criteria, clarification of focused study question, adequacy and properness of literature search, internal validity, a table for data extraction, and publication bias.

Data abstraction

Key variables were extracted from studies including title, population and sample size, sampling method, design, data collection method and main results to ensure that important issues of each paper were not ignored. For the purpose, we used a data abstraction form and recorded data exactly as reported; also to check mismatches, two independent researchers extracted the data.

RESULTS

As a result of this systematic review, we identified 952 references. Two researchers then reviewed all abstracts independently. All articles which did not meet the inclusion criteria or did not belong to health market or healthcare services were eliminated. Figure 1 depicts the PRISMA flow chart of study selection.

Table 1 summarizes some key points regarding twenty-four studies which were finally included in our review. The extracted data from mentioned articles were the title, population and sample size, sampling method, design, data collection method, and main results. The first step in the review was to clarify a definition of health marketing. Review of the extracted articles indicated that marketing in health services bears the concept of patient surveillance or attraction of patients which has two types of internal and external. Internal marketing is a managerial tool which is a competitive advantage that requires internal customers of the organization (the employees) to have customer oriented or marketing behavior and attitude.[17] External marketing is for absorbing patients from other countries and in fact shows the performance of healthcare service delivery, especially hospitals in international level. In the meantime, healthcare/medical tourism is significant for attracting foreign patients to the country. Therefore, in the current review, some of the related medical tourism articles which have a direct relation with health services marketing were also considered. Marketing of hospital services in foreign countries is performed through contracting with patient surveillance agencies, however, based on the recent investigations, no active and organized marketing exist in Iran, and few studies in this regard have been conducted so far. Second, we aimed to identify affecting factors on health services marketing. The use of a framework for this purpose helps easy understanding and comparability of findings which both facilitate having access to most relevant studies by readers. Table 2 shows influencing factors from the viewpoint of included studies which is composed of major components affecting the implementation and development of health marketing.

Recommendations for the development of health marketing are presented in table 3.

DISCUSSION

The review clarified a definition for health marketing and investigated influencing factors on implementation and development of marketing principles in Iran health system. Along with recommendations on how to improve the process development, reviews have reported multiple factors that were essential for marketing implementation regarding health services were presented. Most of the factors were consistent in different studies which have been described in table 2. Key factors included psychological factors, communication, caring, empathy, and personality factors. Comparing to findings of other studies, similar affecting factors such as empathy, communication, caring, and perceived quality were reported.[18,19] This suggests that although health marketing is a newly introduced term in Iran but many researchers believed on constant implementing requisites over time. In fact, all existing research are in the same way to develop an improvement in health services marketing and to expand healthcare institutions' share in the market to attract and retain more committed customers in their organizations. Some controversies about the mission and philosophy of reviewed studies toward health marketing activities were also discovered. One paper specified marketing as an affecting factor among the population; while others emphasized on marketing mission which potentially modifies customers' health behaviors for decreasing the service demand.[20] Also, a study conducted in Iran mentioned marketing as a practical tool for health providers to increase their service area and attract possible care recipients. The study emphasized that identification of care recipients' reasons for choosing a particular physician could be regarded as an appropriate marketing clue which healthcare providers can work on to attract more patients.[21-23] Lack of clear approved definition of health marketing and also a deficiency of well organized, systematic health services marketing efforts in Iran necessitate a proper identification of influencing factors on healthcare marketing to appropriately design marketing principles.[23] In a reviewed study conducted in Shiraz it was concluded that hospitals should put their main focus on the quality of provider- patient communication to better organize their marketing attempts.[13] This finding is also indicated in another similar study.[20] In fact, satisfaction and loyalty are two important components which anticipate the level of acceptance for price and quality of delivered services among care recipients.[14] In this respect, a study conducted in public hospitals of Iran affirmed the importance of medical services prices and quality related to the place of service delivery as marketing elements which dramatically could attract customers.[24] Likewise, other literature mentioned price as an affecting factor in health services marketing. In fact, more competitive prices could bring more loyal customers to the organization.[25-27] Applying competitive strategies through focusing on existing strength points of a hospital or

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Table 1 Characteristics of Included Studies

Ref No	Author, year, city	Title	Addressing group (sample size)	Sampling method	Research type	Data collection method	Result
13	Mosadegh Raad M A, Jouya T 2014, Tehran	Factors influencing physician choice by patients in Tehran	600 patients visiting 54 physicians' offices, general practitioners and specialists	Simple random sampling	Quantitative	questionnaire	Knowledge of reasons for choosing a physician by patients can be a proper tool of marketing for physicians
14	Rezvani M, Khodadad Hoseini H, 2008	Fuzzy Model for Integrated Marketing Communications (Case Study: Medical Equipment industry and sport)	Medical and sports equipment production industry		Presenting a model based on "a system of decision –making in phases "		Phase's theory can contribute to better understanding of business environment and also the establishment of effective strategies for marketing communications in medical and sports equipment industry.
18	Yaghoubi M, et al, Esfahan, 2013	Relationship between marketing with organizational structure and systems approach in selected private hospitals of Esfahan	All managers in administrative, diagnostic and medical sections of three private hospitals (78 managers)	Census	A retrospective cross-correlation	questionnaire	A significant relationship between all dimensions of organizational structure and marketing except for a component that is formal responding to customers. Also the existence of a significant relationship between systems approach and marketing.
19	Abedi et G et al, 2014, Sari	Investigation on the effect of services marketing mixed factors on patients inclination/ orientation to public & private hospitals of Sari city	900 patients in public & private hospitals of Sari city	Random Quota	Descriptive, Cross-sectional	Author developed questionnaire	The element of price is a determining factor for visitors to public hospitals since they offer lower prices comparing to a private hospital. On the other hand, their main reason to visit private hospitals is their employees' positive characteristics.
20	Younesifar M et al, 2013, Yazd	The impact of internal marketing components to improve the performance of personnel working in hospitals	351 of managers, expert staffs, and employees in Shahid Sadoughi hospital of Yazd	Random	Descriptive survey	questionnaire	After examination of internal marketing components on employees of this hospital and reaching a score of 36.74 out of 100 the result is that Shahid Sadougi hospital of Yazd does not have a desirable state in this respect.

Table 1 **Characteristics of Included Studies**

Ref No	Author, year, city	Title	Addressing group (sample size)	Sampling method	Research type	Data collection method	Result
21	Keyvan Ara M et al, 2014, Esfahan	Are Health Institutions Involved In Health Care Induced Demand	Some of the university faculties, physicians, hospital managers, managers of insurance organizations and health economic researchers (from 17 experts)	Purposive sampling	qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	The research findings include two main subjects; insurance companies and other health service delivery institutes. Marketing is an affecting factor among institutes and companies for inducing demand.
22	Yaghoubi M et al, 2011, Esfahan	Affecting factors on patients preference in selection of a hospital based on mixed factors of marketing in selected hospitals of Esfahan	350 patients in selected hospitals of Esfahan	Random stratified	Descriptive, Cross-sectional	Author developed questionnaire of mixed factors of marketing	Recent progress and nature of provided care in healthcare indicate of the need for implementation of innovative marketing techniques, therefore it is essential to pay attention to marketing principles, especially mixed factors of marketing in service delivery.
23	Soultani S et al, 2013, Tehran	Affecting factors on choosing a hospital: case study of Milad hospital	421 of inpatients hospitalized in different wards of Milad hospital	Random stratified	Cross-sectional - Analytical	questionnaire	Patients have different choices in different situations, but having numerous competitive advantages can lead to a repetition of patients' visits to a medical center.
24	Nasiripour A et al, 2010	Designing a Model for Hospital Services Globalization in Iran	Some of the selected countries include America, UK, India, Thailand, and Malaysia	-	Descriptive,comparative & Cross-sectional	questionnaire	In all studied countries a united method of hospital services marketing was performed, i.e. contracts with patient surveillance/scouting agencies. There is no organized and active marketing in Iran
25	Goudarzi M et al, 2014, Shiraz	Medical tourism (internist) in Shiraz	Internal medicine tourism (400 individuals)	Random sampling using Cochran formula	Analytical and survey	questionnaire	There is a significant relationship between medical tourism in Shiraz metropolis and healthcare tourism prices and quality, healthcare facilities and equipment and also between tourism and information technology and communication with the development of medical tourism.

Table 1 **Characteristics of Included Studies**

Ref No	Author, year, city	Title	Addressing group (sample size)	Sampling method	Research type	Data collection method	Result
26	Akhavan P, Dehghan M, 2014	Role of knowledge management in improvement of marketing activities (case study of active companies in supplying medical equipment)	Active companies in the areas of supplying medical equipment (98 individuals)	random sampling	Descriptive, comparative	questionnaire	Knowledge management affects most affecting factors in marketing, including pricing and common advertisement policies, improvement of selling services, using new technologies, improvement of distribution, entrance to new domestic and international markets
27	Kazemi A et al, 2015, Esfahan	Analysis of the effect of fair perceived price by customers on acceptance of delivered health services prices through satisfaction and loyalty	Private health centers patients (345 individuals)	Stratified random sampling	Descriptive - survey and based on structural equation modeling	questionnaire	Customer satisfaction & loyalty are two anticipating components for accepting prices. Fair perceived price by customers is one of important marketing elements in hospitals and healthcare service delivery organizations.
28	Yaghoubi M et al, 2013, Esfahan	Strategic analysis of hospitals in marketing planning: case study of a private hospital in Esfahan	15 managers, nursing manager and managers of medical sections of the hospital	Purposive sampling	Mixed method study (quantitative-qualitative)	1- Interview & Focus Group Discussions (FGD) 2- Questionnaire of internal and external factors	Strength points of marketing in the hospital was mostly related to space and place of the hospital, medical care, and existence of qualified and experienced physicians, various facilities and services, productivity indicators of the hospital, consultation services and publication of hospital brochures and their distribution among patients.
29	Nasiri Pour A et al, 2011, Tehran	Mixed model of medical services marketing in public hospitals of Iran	Public & private hospitals managers in Tehran and expert staffs in public health deputy of Iran Health ministry		Practical- Analytical	Fish card and questionnaire made by author	Confirmation of mixed model of medical services marketing with seven dimensions. Dimensions with the most effect: location/place (0.82 coefficient) and price (0.81 coefficient)
30	Mosahab R, et al,2011(Tehran)	Motivational Orientation as an Internal Marketing Tool in Service Training: A Study of Service Delivery in a Hospital	In this study, a number of300 employees (male and female) were selected by random Sampling from the total population of 980 in nursing, medical technology and food service professions in Imam Khomeini.	Random sampling		A questionnaire based on Gardner's Attitude/ Motivation Test Battery (AMTB)	Findings of the present study show that the hospital employees are both instrumentally and interactively oriented towards Service training. This study of socio-psychological variables of the employees provides additional insights in better identifying motivation l challenges and taking more realistic perspectives about the service training as an instrument of internal marketing (IM).

Table 1 **Characteristics of Included Studies**

Ref No	Author, year, city	Title	Addressing group (sample size)	Sampling method	Research type	Data collection method	Result
31	Rahimi M, et al,2013(Tehran)	Preparation and Designing a Checklist for Health Care Marketing Mix, with Medical Tourism Approach	To design the checklist, the author used passed studies in the field of marketing. To reach studies performed in Iran	Purposive sampling	a cross-sectional and qualitative study	used previous studies in marketing by referring to relevant web sites	Also by using this check List, health institutions and hospitals can recognize their strengths and opportunities as well as the Improvable points in different services fields like medical tourism and find a remedy for their improvable points for maximum use of their potential.
32	Younesi far M et al, 2012, Yazd	The degree of internal marketing components and their impact on service quality improvement	377 managers and expert staffs employed in Afshar hospital of Yazd	Random	Survey and opinion polls	questionnaire	Noting the positive and direct effect of internal marketing on employees' satisfaction and commitment, it is necessary to pay attention to employees' outcomes, especially their organizational satisfaction through a focus on different aspects of internal marketing. For example, measures which can strengthen internal marketing, gaining knowledge of changes in employees values, understanding labor market conditions, identification of internal segmentations specific to employees based on their characters and desires, and designing strategies for customers.
33	Ayoubian A, et al,2013)Tehran)	Medical Tourism Attraction of Tehran Hospitals	195 people from the managing boards of 8 hospitals of Tehran in 2012.	Random sampling	A descriptive study	A questionnaire was designed to gather data	According to the results, it seems media advertising is the most effective in attracting medical tourists. Furthermore, the advertisement of the capabilities of hospitals alongside marketing could help attract more medical tourists.
34	Danai H et al, 2013, Tehran, Tabriz, Ardebil, Shiraz	Market segmentation of medical tourism in Iran using cluster analysis	321 visitors to Imam khomeini hospital of Tehran, Imam Reza hospital of Tabriz, Imam khomeini hospital in Ardebil and Namazi hospital in Shiraz	Random sampling Using Morgan table	Descriptive - comparative	Library and literature review, face to face interviews to fill questionnaires	Service delivery with respect has the highest importance among four clusters. Hospitals should focus their marketing attempts on communication quality with their customers.

Table 1 **Characteristics of Included Studies**

Ref No	Author, year, city	Title	Addressing group (sample size)	Sampling method	Research type	Data collection method	Result
35	Palesh M, et al,2010	We noticed that suddenly the country has become full of MRI". Policy makers' views on diffusion and use of health technologies in Iran	13 informants in different positions and levels of authority in the Ministry of Health (MOH), University of Medical Sciences, Health Insurance Organizations, and Parliament.		qualitative	semi-structured interviews	Several obstacles to applying knowledge about HT and HTA were described. Market forces such as advertising, and physician and consumer demand, appear to have a strong influence on HT diffusion and use.
36	Rokni l et al, 2013(shiraz)	Appraisal the Potential of Central Iran, in the Context of Health Tourism	experienced people of extensive knowledge on medical tourism (n:50)	Purposive sampling	qualitative	interview	Arab countries in the Persian Gulf were detected as the main marketing for Shiraz medical tourism. _Oman encompassed the highest rate with 20% of admitted patients
37	Jabbari A et al, 2016	Medical tourism in Iran: Issues and challenges	Thirty professionals and researchers in this field were interviewed and official documents belonging to the Health ministry as well as tourism organization and finally related literature were examined	Purposive sampling	descriptive, analytical and qualitative	interviewed and official documents	More and effective public-private participations, aggressive marketing, improving infrastructures, and international accreditation of health care facilities and human resources development could improve medical tourism industry in the country.
38	Jabbari A et al, 2013	The Marketing Mix and Development of Medical Tourism in Shiraz	The research community included all the public and private hospitals of Shiraz among which, 7 public and 9 private hospitals were studied.		descriptive-analytic and cross sectional	researcher-made check list	According to the results, both public and private hospitals of Shiraz were in the best condition regarding staff and physician mix and in the worst condition concerning promoting and facilities mixes. No significant difference was found between public and private hospitals regarding the mixes. From marketing mix elements view, paying more attention to media advertisements and providing more facilities can improve the status of the hospitals which, consequently, results in attracting more medical tourists and developing this industry in Shiraz.

Table 2 Summary of Influencing Factors on Implementation of Health Marketing

Major factor	Factor component
Caring	Special attention to patients' needs; Giving priority to both physical and psychological health of care recipients; Attention to hospital workforce as internal customers who play an important role in organizational improvements; Adjustment of patient needs and preferences.
Assurance	Ensuring to employ competent, credible and knowledgeable staff for providing health services for patients; Applying and continuously monitoring quality standards in healthcare institutions; Application of proper technology in health institutions in a way that maximizes its advantage to patients' health.
Communication	Continuous, welcoming and responsiveness communication between caregivers and patients; Explaining patients' disease and its treatment choices or process to provide the possibility; of their participation in associated decision makings.
personality factors	Respecting patients' freedom of decision making and ensuring their authority in treatment and caring process; Respecting care recipients' cultural differences; Respecting patients' privacy and confidentiality of their health information; Respecting patients' rights.
Perceived quality	Provision of appropriate physical environment; Availability, accessibility, and appropriateness of provided health care services; Provision of proper food, caring environment and other amenities for patients.
Responsiveness	Organizing complaints and problem-solving department in the health organization; Application of effective healthcare services according to up-to-date clinical guidelines; Provision of affordable, prompt and safe healthcare services.
Tangibility	Provision of proper and high quality medical and para-medical equipment Provision of proper caring and medical services environment

Table 3 Recommendations for Health Marketing Development Based on Reviews

Key influencing stakeholders in the body of planning or policy making system should be motivated, acknowledged, and participated in the implementation process of health marketing.
Adequate financial, information, human resources, and legitimate support should be gained.
Planning for successful achievement of the process should take strong and principled steps.
Continuous training and education oriented to key success factors of the process should be provided.
Benchmarking successful health systems which could effectively use marketing principles should be flourished while adaptability, cost, complexity, and other important issues should also be considered.

other healthcare authorities could be beneficial in achieving marketing missions. Strength points in hospital marketing are more related to space and physical environment, medical team behavior, and their way of communication, expertise, and qualification of health providers, hospital reputation, and its productivity indicators.[28-31] Moreover, satisfaction and loyalty were regarded as two important components which could anticipate acceptance and satisfaction level of provided services among patients.[14,24] Situation analysis and identification of strength and weakness points along with clarification of opportunities and threats in the external environment were regarded as key elements in hospital success.[32] Furthermore, results confirmed that marketing efforts not only influenced patients or care recipients but also affected health providers or caregivers in such a way that lead to an increase in customers' commitment and satisfaction during the time.[33,34] In this regard, a number of measures that can be strengthened, include gaining knowledge of how to change workforce values so that patients and their needs become the priority, motivating stakeholders in the body of planning or policy making system, provision of adequate financial, information, human resources, and legitimate support, planning for successful achievement of the process and continuous education for being oriented to key success factors of the process.[35] In addition, some studies focused on advertising as an influencing factor which even played a significant role in medical tourism.[36-38] Such an attracting tool also informs the population about a proper time and place which they can refer to health institution for receiving excellent, high-quality services.[31,33]

CONCLUSION

The literature review revealed that adequate attention had not been paid to the health marketing either in public health institutions nor private centers in Iran. Existing research in the area has introduced a wide range of factors affecting health services marketing; which necessitate health providers

both individuals or institutions to comprehensively understand factors having the most effect on medical services marketing with the most emphasize on the points of planning, implementation, and management. Finally, it is recommended that Iran health service centers establish marketing departments in their organizations and through utilization of suitable tools in marketing analysis set their developmental strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge all authors who shared us their valuable work experiences to promote our study quality.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declared no conflict of interest.

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