

Determinants of People's Selection of Healthcare Provider: A Comparative Study on Private and Public Hospitals in Kollam District, Kerala

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Abstract

Now a days, people are sensible and alert regarding their health. They often seek information about any medical issues they might be facing and consider alternatives before coming to a decision. And when it comes to choosing hospital, behaviors of the staff, outside reputation of the hospital, quality of care, and hygiene conditions concern them. Patients nowadays want to be updated regularly; they want swift treatment and personalized care. The state of Kerala is a place that's famous for its high literacy rates and a robust healthcare system, the state has genuinely embraced technology in healthcare. Both the public and private hospitals are really putting in the effort to make healthcare more efficient, patient-friendly, and easier to access for everyone. The government hospitals are actively embracing IT through state-supported programs and central initiatives such as the *e-Health Kerala* project. Its goal is to create a centralized digital healthcare platform, provide each citizen with a unique health identification and integrated digital health records. Currently private hospitals in Kerala adopt state-of-the-art technologies. Many institutions adopt technology-oriented information systems, electronic health records (EHR), online appointment booking, digital payment options, customer satisfaction surveys, and cloud data storage. The data accuracy and favourable patient experience resulted in trusted hospital services. The current study focused on analyzing the factors determining people's selection of public and private hospitals in the Kollam district of Kerala. The study adopted descriptive research methodology, intends to differentiate the choice factors of the general public regarding the selection of government and private hospitals for their treatment. The study concluded by identifying several significant factors for the selection of both government and private hospital for a given geographic area.

Keywords : healthcare provider, people's choice, public and private hospitals, personalized care, information technology.

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Introduction

Healthcare system in developing country, like India, have interesting dual structure; the government services on one side and the private sector on the other. The co-existence of these two sectors afford individuals the opportunity to choose their medical care; however, the determinants influencing this choice are multifaceted and deeply entrenched in socio economic, cultural, and systemic variables. Selecting a course of treatment at either a public or private hospital goes beyond individual choice. It involves a combination of cost, convenience, healthcare system perceptions, waiting-time, staff attitudes, facilities, literacy, and prior interactions with the provider (*Kumar A. 2023*).

In India, the government has always been the dominant healthcare provider, particularly in the rural and remote regions. Government hospitals are a pivotal point of healthcare access to the population as they provide low-cost or free services. Despite these benefits, reliance on public healthcare is limited due to over-crowding, inadequate staffing, scarce resources, and long wait times. The past few decades have really seen some incredible growth in the private sector, which provides specialized, high-quality services. Accordingly, private hospitals are widely perceived as more efficient and patient-oriented, particularly among urban middle-income and upper-income groups.

In our country, the decision to go for a public or private hospital really depends on factors such as literacy levels, income, and, the healthcare infrastructure. Kerala stands out with a well-developed healthcare system, shaped by years of consistent investment. The state's people benefit from high life expectancy, low infant mortality rates, and high health awareness, makes Kerala as a shining example of how to make smart healthcare

choices. The allopathic system of medicine has significantly influenced the development of healthcare in Kerala. Most specialty hospitals in both government and private sectors are based on this system. Over rush of patients and shortage of advanced infrastructure in the public health care system of Kerala, has pushed people to private hospitals. Being highly health literate, majority people depends private hospitals because of quality of care, quicker diagnostics, hygienic environment, and the availability of specialized doctors.

By examining the general trends in India and the specific nature of Kollam, in Kerala, especially in the health sector, the study intended to explore the primary variables influencing the selection of hospitals. The findings will help in improving health systems in the future, could able to address the needs and expectations of the people. From the literature review, it is evident that access to healthcare is pretty complicated, involving how affordable it is to the public and how well it satisfies the customer's needs.

Literature Review

Research over the years has pointed out some important factors that people consider, when choosing a hospital - such as hygiene, cleanliness, institutional reputation, infrastructure, and the availability of essential amenities like water and electricity etc. Financial factors, including both treatment and travel-related expenses, also play a critical role in healthcare provider selection. Interestingly, findings from Western literature shows some key factors that matter in the Indian context too - like, treatment quality, availability of prescribed medications, and access to the choice of doctor. Paul P.K and Jana S.K (2024) evaluated considerable variation in the preference of people for a type of healthcare facility, potentially influenced by factors as location, cost of treatment, infrastructure, physician's referral, or,

other demographic variables.

Many studies in India have shown that there is a growing dominance of private healthcare sector. According to NSSO 75th round report (2019) on 'key indicators of social consumption in India: health', 57% of the rural population of Kerala depends on private hospitals for treatment, compared to 40% who availed government health care facilities. In urban Kerala, the trend was similar with 59% availing care from private hospitals and 36% utilizing public hospitals. The previous investigations reveal the dominant part of private hospitals in the healthcare service sector of both rural and urban areas of Kerala.

Sharmila (2013), studied the patient expectations of service quality in private corporate hospitals in Chennai city and identify the factors like “quality of medical care, communication between hospital staff and patients, hygiene, lab and diagnostic facilities, comfort and ambiance, and, emotional factors received by the patients during their stay at the hospitals”. The results clearly shows that private hospitals received good scores in most of the factors under study. The public hospitals were far behind in delivering quality services according to the expectations of patients, due to factors such as lack of motivation among hospital staffs to understand the views of patients, lack of funding, and, lack of autonomy in decision making. (*Dr. Lakshmi. B et al. 2020*) studied how patients in Hyderabad choose between private and government healthcare facilities. They found that factors like demographics, social and economic background, service quality, and availability of diagnostic equipment influence this choice. Doctor experience and proximity also play a role, but their impact is relatively minor.

Dr. Lekshmi. R. Nair et al. (2017) identified the

preference factors for the choice of private and public healthcare services by people and examine the patterns of health-related expenditures across different hospitals in Panangad and Kaloork, Kerala. Similarly, *Rani Esther and Seilan. A (2019)* studied general preference of hospitals by rural households in Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. The study reveals that private hospitals provide quality clinical services and standard of healthcare compared to the poor infrastructure and medical services in public hospitals. Numerous studies in India have examined factors influencing the choice between government and private hospitals, research specifically addressing healthcare preferences in Kerala is relatively scarce.

Research Gap

The requirement for medical services is rising due to an aging population, an expanding middle-income group, greater life expectancy, and a rise in chronic diseases. Owing to this increasing need, the private healthcare institutions have significantly contributed in the development of healthcare infrastructure, particularly areas where public health institutions face challenges or limitations.

In Kerala, the expansion of the private healthcare institutions has emerged in response to unmet healthcare needs in the public healthcare sector, leading to increased reliance on private hospitals. Various previous studies in Kerala revealed that (*Dr. Lekshmi. R. Nair et al. (2017)*, *Dhanya P. Maneesh. P. (2018)*) private healthcare sector is dominated by service providers of allopathic medicine in Kerala. The proposed study attempts to 'determine and compare the selection factors by the patients in choosing healthcare institutions in private or government sector concerning selected specialty hospitals in the Kollam district of Kerala.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the choice of people's selection of private hospitals/ government hospitals.
- To compare factors that influence people in choosing Private or Government hospitals.
- Identify the association between socio - demographic variables and people's preference for hospital.

Research Methodology

The study explores the choice factors that influence people's selection of private or government healthcare providers using a descriptive research design.

Study Design

The sample population for the study includes patients from both the private and government health sectors. A purposive sampling method was used for the study. For both study groups, a structured questionnaire was administered, and the data were collected. The collected data was analyzed to identify the main factors influencing

people's choice of hospital. The questionnaire was developed based on insights from previous studies and existing literature on the subject.

Sample Size

The sample population for field survey comprises a total of 100 respondents from Kollam district. The selected hospitals included Government Taluk hospitals of Kollam Corporation area, Kottarakkara Municipal area, and four specialty private hospitals in Kollam district. The primary data collected from the respondents are converted in ti tables for the purpose of analysis. The details about hospital are being assessed with the help of secondary data from published sources.

Data Collection

The data sources include individuals seeking treatment from two government Taluk hospitals and four specialty private hospitals in the selected geographical area. A structured questionnaire was prepared by the researcher himself with the help of literature reviews and its validity was done with the help of experts from management studies. The reliability of the tool was estimated with a test-retest reliability test by using the formula.

$$\text{Reliability 'r'} = \frac{N \sum XY - (\sum X)(\sum Y)}{[N \sum X^2 - (\sum X)^2][N \sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2]}$$

The score for reliability R-value=0.972.

The first part of the study includes informed consent from participants to use their responses for research purpose. The second part collected socio - demographic details through twelve questions, covering age,gender,education,income level and source,marital status,distance to the hospital, and frequency of hospital visits.In the final section, participants rated the importance of eighteen key factors in hospital selection using a three-point Likert scale(Good,Average,Bad).They

then evaluated the same twenty-one factors based on how well these applied to the hospital they choose.This data was analyzed analyzed to find most influential factors in hospital choice. The study examined major hospital choice factors, include the competence of medical and support staff, availability of emergency and laboratory services, hospital reputation, treatment cost, geographic accessibility, and the availability of modern infrastructure.

Data Analysis.

Demographic Profile.

Table No.1 Distribution of Respondents by Age

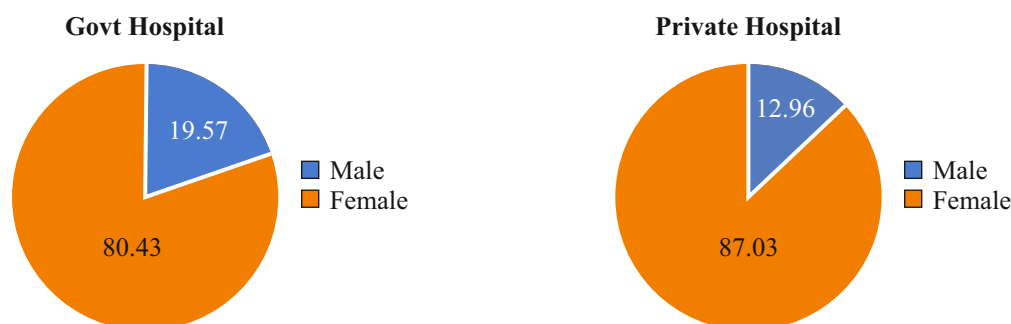
Age	Public Hospital	Private Hospital	Total
Below 20 Yrs	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
20 to 40 Yrs	20(43.48)	46 (85.18)	66 (66)
41 to 60 Yrs	7 (15.22)	3 (5.56)	10 (10)
61 to 80 Yrs	11 (23.91)	2(3.70)	13 (13)
Above 80 Yrs	8 (17.39)	3(5.56)	11 (11)

Source: primary survey

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents based on age group. Among the individuals aged 20-40, 43.48% of users choose government sector hospitals, while a significantly higher 85.18% of users preferred private sector hospitals. The average age of respondents preferred government

hospitals was 53 years, while in private hospital users, it was 36 years. The finding reveals that younger people are more likely to choose private hospitals where as elder individuals tend to seek treatment at government hospitals for managing different health issues.

Chart No.1 Distribution of respondents by Gender



Source: primary survey

The chart shows that females respondents were dominant in both hospital types ie, 80.43% in government hospitals and 87% in private hospitals,

while male respondents account for 19.57% and 12.96% respectively.

Table No.2 Distribution of Respondents According to Education.

Education	Public Hospital	Private Hospital	Total
Below Matriculate	0 (0)	0(0)	0(0)
Matriculate	4 (8.70)	8 (14.81)	12(12)
Graduate	13(28.26)	11(20.37)	24 (24)
Post-Graduate	29 (63.04)	35 (64.81)	64 (64)
Total	46 (100)	54 (100)	100 (100)

Source: primary survey

Table 2 reveals the education status level distribution of sample respondents. Among government hospital users (n=46), 63.04% of users were post-graduates. The remaining 28.26% of users were graduates, and 8.70% of users passed matriculation respectively. In comparison to private hospital users (n = 54), 64.81% of users were postgraduates, 20.37% users were graduates,

and 14.81% users attained only matriculation. Notably, the proportion of post-graduates were more among private hospital users (64.81%) compared to those in government hospitals (63.04%). Subsequently, a high percentage of users in private hospitals were matriculated (14.81%) compared to those with government hospital users, ie, (8.70%).

Table No.3 Distribution of Respondents Based on Monthly Income.

Monthly Income	Public Hospital	Private Hospital	Total
Below Rs 10000/-	23 (50)	11 (20.37)	34 (34)
Rs 10000/- to 30000/-	15 (32.61)	23 (42.60)	38 (38)
Rs 30001/- to 50000/-	6 (13.04)	10 (18.51)	16(16)
Rs50001/- to 100000/-	2 (4.35)	10 (18.51)	12 (12)
Total	46 (100)	54 (100)	100(100)

Source: primary survey

Table 3 infers the monthly income distribution of respondents. In case of government hospital users, (n = 46), 50% earned below ₹10,000 as monthly income, 32.61% users between ₹10,000–₹30,000, 13.04% users between ₹30,001–₹50,000, and the remaining 4.35% users between ₹50,001–₹1,00,000. For private hospital users (n = 54), 20.37% earned below ₹10,000 as monthly

income, 42.60% between ₹10,000–₹30,000, and 18.51% each in the ₹30,001–₹50,000 and ₹50,001–₹1,00,000 brackets. Private hospital users reported a higher average monthly family income of (₹.30,833/-) compared to those of government hospitals (₹.17500/-), indicates that income significantly influence one's ability to afford healthcare.

Table No.4 Distribution Of Respondents by Occupation

Type of Occupation	Public Hospital	Private Hospital	Total
Private	13 (28.26)	34 (62.96)	47 (47)
Government	8(17.39)	7 (12.96)	15 (15)
Self-employed	2(4.35)	3 (5.56)	5(5)
Dependent	17 (36.95)	8(14.81)	25 (25)
Retired	6(13.04)	2 (3.70)	8(8)
Total	46 (100)	54 (100)	100 (100)

Source: primary survey

Table 4 reveals the occupation distribution of respondents. Among government hospital users(n=54), 36.95% of respondents were dependent. The remaining 28.26% and 17.39% respondents were private and government job holders. But in the case of private hospital

users(n=46), 62.96% of people have private occupation. The remaining 14.81% and 12.96% of respondents were dependents and government job holders, respectively. The majority of respondents who had private sector occupations preferred private hospitals for treatment.

Table No.5 Distribution of Sample Respondents by the Availability of Health Insurance

Health insurance	Public Hospital	Private Hospital	Total
Yes	35 (76)	44 (81.5)	79 (79)
No	11 (24)	10 (18.5)	21 (21)
Total	46 (100)	54 (100)	100 (100)

Source: primary survey

Table 5 infers that 76% of public hospital users and 81.5% of private hospital users have health

insurance coverage.

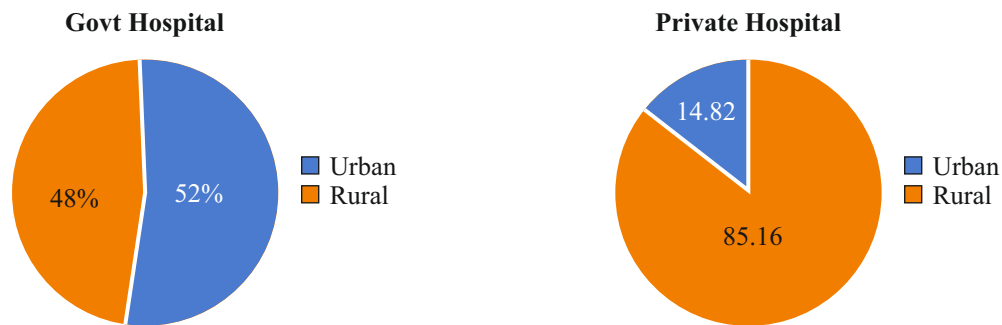
Table No.6 Distribution Respondents According to Marital Status

Marital Status	Public Hospital	Private Hospital	Total
Married	14(30.43)	12 (22.22)	26(26)
Unmarried	32 (69.57)	42 (77.78)	74 (74)
Divorced	0	0	0
Total	46 (100)	54 (100)	100 (100)

Source: primary survey

The table 6 reveals that regarding marital status, 69.57 percent and 77.78 percent of respondents

were unmarried in the choice of public and private hospital, respectively.

Chart No.2 Distribution of Sample Respondents by Area of Residence.

Source: primary survey

The charts reveal that, in public hospital selected respondents 52.18 percentage of people were residents of urban areas and remaining 47.83

percent from rural areas. But among private hospital preferred people, majority (85.16 percent) belongs to urban residential areas.

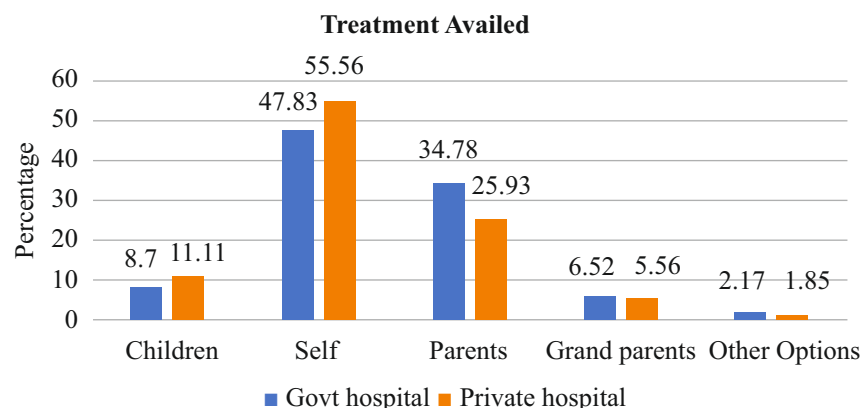
Table No. 7 Respondent Distribution Based on Proximity to Hospital.

Distance	Public Hospital	Private Hospital	Total
Below 10 Kms	26 (56.52)	46(85.19)	72(72)
10 kms to 20 Kms	13 (28.26)	5(9.26)	18(82)
Above 20 kms	7(15.22)	3(5.56)	10 (10)
Total	46 (100)	54 (100)	100 (100)

Source: primary survey

The table inferred that, with regard to distance from residence to hospital, the most people (56.52%) preferred a public hospital below 10 km

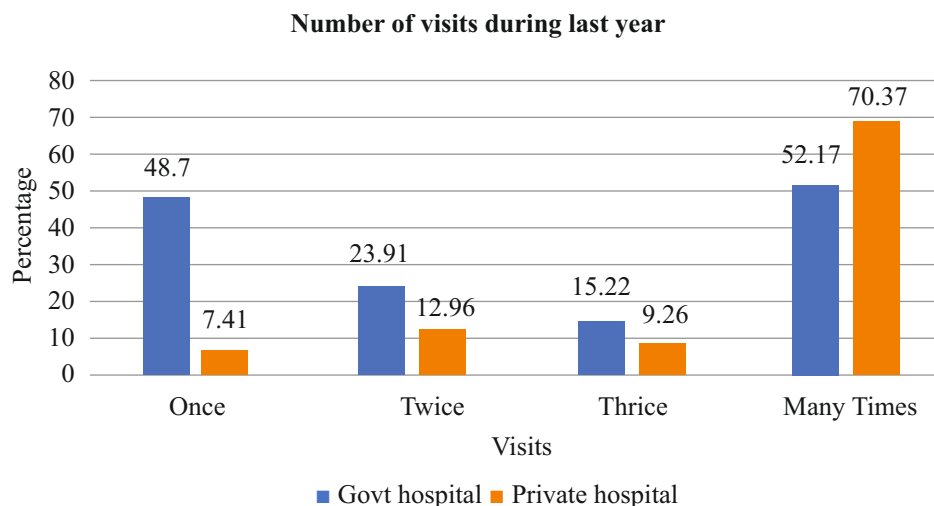
distance . 85.19 % of people in private sector hospitals choice preferred a distance of below 10 km.

Chart No. 3 Distribution of Respondents by treatment Availd for.

Source: primary survey

The chart shows that, under government hospital selected people 47.83% availed treatment for self and 34.78 % availed treatment for their parents. In

the case of private hospital, 55.56% people availed treatment for themselves and 25.93% people availed treatment for their parents.

Chart No. 4 Distribution of Respondents by Number of visits during last year.

The chart shows that 52.17% and 70.37% of people, respectively visited both public and private hospitals many times during the last year.

Reasons for the selection of Healthcare Services.

In this study, 100 respondents rated key factors influencing hospital choice using a three-point Likert scale. The compiled responses are presented below;

Table 8. Association between demographic variables and selection of hospital

Demographic	Degree of freedom	Chi-square Value	P value	Inference
Age	1	6.448891956	0.0111	S
Gender	1	8.605551721	0.0034	S
Education status	2	8.916032936	0.0023	S
Income status	4	12.83899496	0.0122	S
Source of income	3	4.34014	0.227	NS
Health insurance	1	2.937239894	0.0875	NS
Marital status	1	3.281207629	0.0701	NS
Residential area	1	0.250492038	0.6171	NS
Distance from house to hospital	2	1.646815898	0.4389	NS
Previous admission	1	0.023250407	0.8788	NS
Treatment availed	4	3.586857587	0.4648	NS
Number of hospital visits	3	3.518720528	0.318	NS

* = Significant at 0.05 level. NS - Not Significant. S- Significant.
Source: Field data

Table 8 shows that demographic variables of people such as age, gender, education level, and income status were significantly associated with

hospital preference. Most of the young educated people with medium to high income status made their clear vision and choice in selecting hospitals

in their region. All the other variables had no significant association with the selection of hospitals.

Table 9. Variables affecting people's decisions in the selection of private hospitals.

Sl.No	Weights	3	2	1	Weighted Total	Score	Rank
1.	Location and Accessibility	48	6	0	156	26.00	2
2.	Previous Experience with hospital	44	10	0	152	25.33	4
3.	Emergency Services	46	8	0	154	25.67	3
4.	Prompt service	34	20	0	142	23.67	9
5.	Competent Nursing Staff	46	8	0	154	25.66	3
6.	Qualified Doctors	48	6	0	156	26.00	2
7.	Accreditation	24	30	0	132	22.00	11
8.	Positive word of mouth	34	20	0	142	23.66	9
9.	Simple Admission procedure	16	32	6	118	19.67	12
10.	Affordable price for treatment	8	32	14	102	17.00	14
11.	Health Insurance	44	6	4	148	24.67	6
12.	Easy appointment	40	14	0	148	24.66	6
13.	Technology	50	4	0	158	26.33	1
14.	Specialty Service	48	6	0	156	26.00	2
15.	Physician's recommendation	38	16	0	146	24.33	7
16.	In-built pharmacy	42	12	0	150	25.00	5
17.	Discharge procedure	24	14	16	116	19.33	13
18.	Cleanliness	46	8	0	154	25.66	3
19.	Private rooms	32	22	0	140	23.33	10
20.	Infrastructure	38	16	0	146	24.33	7
21.	Parking and security	36	18	0	144	24.00	8

Source: Field data

The table reveals the result of the weighted average ranking of people's decision factors in the selection of a government hospital in the Kollam district. Affordable treatment costs, the availability of qualified doctors (Rank 1), and other factors mainly influenced the selection of government hospitals for treatment by poor people. The low to middle-income people, lacking a stable income, chose government hospitals. The availability of experienced doctors is also a major influencing factor for such people in society. The availability of 24-hour in-built pharmacy facility with

discounted prices for medicines (rank 2) motivated most of the common people in choosing government hospitals. People with health insurance cards (Rank 3) are also seeking treatment in government hospitals, mainly because of the inability to afford the high treatment costs of private hospitals. Easy location and accessibility of hospitals, nearness to residence, and infrastructure of hospital premises (rank 4) were also important variables in the choice of government hospital selection.

Research Findings And Discussion

The findings of the study were compared with those of an earlier study by Dhanya P. V. and Maneesh P. (2018), conducted in Kannur district, Kerala. Their research explored the key factors that influence people's choice of healthcare services in both public and private hospitals. While there exists some common patterns between the two studies, several meaningful differences also emerge, particularly in the socio-demographic profiles of the respondents, as highlighted below;

- In the present study, respondents belong to the 20 to 40 age group. In contrast, the earlier study conducted in Kannur district of Kerala reveals that, the majority of participants were aged between 30 to 50 years.
- Younger individuals tend to favour private hospitals, whereas elder people are more likely to choose government hospitals for medical care. The previous study also showed such trends.
- The data suggested that females are the primary user of services in both type of hospitals.
- The education background reveals that individuals with higher education levels were more inclined toward private hospitals for treatment, the results were similar to the previous study.
- People from middle and high-income brackets mostly preferred private hospitals, while the majority of economically disadvantaged respondents depended on government hospitals for healthcare service.
- The majority of respondents sought healthcare in hospitals located within a 10-kilometer

radius of their homes, emphasized that proximity plays a prominent role in the choice selection of both type of hospitals.

- Availability of health insurance claim facilities was a significant consideration for most respondents when choosing a hospital.
- For private hospital users, major choice factors includes convenient location, accessibility, advanced medical technology, availability of specialized care, and the presence of skilled staff, which shows difference that of previous study.
- Conversely, respondents who chose government hospitals were largely influenced by factors such as affordable treatment costs, the presence of qualified and experienced doctors, availability of an in-house 24-hour pharmacy, acceptance of health insurance claims. The most significant one is hospital's proximity to their place of residence, which was similar in previous study of Kannur.

Conclusion

In today's competitive healthcare landscape of Kerala, cutting edge strategies are becoming crucial to meet the sustainable need for quality medical care. There is a 'smart transformation' towards personalized care, with treatments specifically tailored to each patient's generic, environmental, and lifestyle factors. The study revealed that people want personalized care and attention in hospitals with easy access, good infrastructure, and competent and friendly services in a tension-free atmosphere. The study will enlighten the main choice reason why people choose either hospitals-private or government. In our society, poor people who need free basic medical care mainly approach government hospitals. Private hospitals are increasingly choose

for their advanced technology and superior care, despite higher costs. The study also notes a growing preference among the younger generation for private healthcare for their families.

Recommendation

The findings suggest that it is the responsibility of government authorities to maintain hygienic, people- friendly atmosphere in the government owned and controlled hospitals with state-of -the -art medical technology and infrastructure. Nowadays, people are increasingly proactive and discerning when it comes to selecting personalized care and treatment options close to where they live. Therefore, all hospitals—whether privately managed or government-run - should establish a clear vision and effective strategies to build and maintain a comprehensive database of loyal patients within their service group. This strategy will help to ensure long term sustainability in the healthcare sector of Kollam district and, more broadly, across the state of Kerala.

Scope For Future Research

In the midst of growing patient demands, rising healthcare costs, and the need for greater efficiency, hospitals are adopting 'smart hospital' concept and strategy to transform patient care. Future research is recommended to involve larger sample sizes or be conducted in different larger geographic regions, focusing on the transformation journey toward becoming a future-proof 'smart hospital' and healthcare system. Such research studies could also explore additional factors not examined in the current research. Moreover, the use of alternative analytical or statistical methods is encouraged for future investigations.

Limitations

The researcher conducted study with a limited sample size of 100 respondents confined to the southern region (Kollam district) of Kerala. The primary data collection period was short, lasted only two weeks. Due to the limited sample size and lack of random sampling, the findings may have limited generalization. Moreover, decision-making and preference factors may differ depending on the type of healthcare system available in a given country or other geographic regions.

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