

A VIEW ON MEDICAL TOURISM

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Abstract: *Medical tourism has been developing at a constant rate in the recent years. The high prices for some treatments in the developed countries opened new markets in other locations around the world. High quality medical services and state of the art technologies offered in these countries, managed to attract numerous tourists in this sector. Medical tourism represents a multi-billion dollar industry at a global scale, having a strong impact on the economies of the involved countries as well as of the patients themselves.*

Key words: *medical tourism, health tourism, travel*

INTRODUCTION

In short medical tourism can be described as the travel made by a person outside the area where he/she lives for a medical treatment. The development of transportation systems and the reduction of travel time have made possible treatment in other countries for more and more people.

OECD mentions the relation between medical tourism and the broader notion of health tourism which, "in some countries, has longstanding historical antecedents of spa towns and coastal localities, and other therapeutic landscapes" [27].

Because of the unclear interlacing between terms the current literature uses very loosely and unsystematically medical tourism, health tourism, and wellness tourism [10]. According to Smith & Puczko health tourism is comprised of medical tourism and wellness tourism [32].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The basic principle of medical tourism might be considered the perfect combination between the useful and the pleasant. Foreigners can be treated cheaply and qualitatively, but also admire the tourist locations, the excellent quality-price ratio offered being the most important factor that attracts foreign tourists.

Medical tourism has roots from ancient times when the Sumerians and then the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans traveled to other countries for health related issues, in most cases to baths and thermal springs [3,22]. The Middle Ages experienced a decrease in interest for this type of tourism, but in the 18th century it has again resurrected in the British city of Bath and in France. After the Second World War it took a new momentum along with the other types of tourism.

Treatment and spa tourism represents an important resource being a specific form of leisure tourism which has experienced a great development in recent decades and is a multiplier of the development of the tourism economy [26,30].

Dangor [9] mentions that „the rapid development of medical technologies, services and facilities in developing countries has resulted in a form of ‘reverse globalisation’, where patients from developed countries seek medical care in developing countries, for reasons including affordability, quality, and greater access to services”. Thus medical professionals need to stay current on the latest equipment, treatments and techniques [1]. According to Cameron et al [5] patients might also feel dissatisfaction with their national healthcare systems, thus they are looking for alternatives elsewhere.

According to Lunt et al [18] there are some specific features of the medical tourism in the 21st century:

- People traveling in large numbers for medical treatment,
- The patients from richer and more developed countries travel to less developed countries to obtain medical services, because of the lower cost of treatments and cheaper transportation,
- Modern infrastructure that allows accessible travel and easily available internet information,
- The promotion of health and medical tourism as a potentially profitable source of external income.

Vrkljan & Hendija [33] realize that "globally, health tourism is showing above-average growth rates and the potential for further growth. The reason for this can be found in the present trend of population aging and the trend of healthy lifestyle by the growing middle class or unhealthy lifestyles".

Penney et al [29] suggest that medical tourism represents a practice whereby patients travel outside of their home country in order to receive medical care.

Holloway [13] explains that medical tourism is used to "refer to people who travel to another country specifically to consult specialists or undergo medical treatment".

Tourism for health purposes is travel undertaken in order to receive medical treatment, but includes visit to spas, being merged quite often to pleasure motivations as well [34]. Aluculesei et al believe health tourism is a key factor in reducing employee stress [2].

Connell describes medical tourism as „a niche has emerged from the rapid growth of what has become an industry, where people travel often long distances to overseas countries to obtain medical, dental and surgical care while simultaneously being holidaymakers” [6]

Crooks et al [8] explain that medical tourism means that "individuals travel across international borders to access private, non-emergency medical interventions that are unavailable, delayed, unsafe, relatively inaccessible, or too costly in their country of residence". Johnston et al [14] realize that medical tourists are motivated by high costs, long waiting times and a lack of accessibility in their home health systems.

Medical tourism has emerged from the broader notion of health tourism. Some researchers have considered health and medical tourism as a combined phenomenon but with different emphases [17].

The researchers observed that there are various categories for the medical tourism, such as "dental tourism, reproductive tourism, abortion tourism, surgical tourism, bariatric tourism, lipotourism, aesthetic medicine tourism, pharmaceutical tourism, euthanasia tourism, medical spa tourism, oncology tourism, and transplant tourism" [13,16,28].



Figure 1. Reasons for travel and medical tourism

Source: adapted from Kazemha A., & Dehkordi K., 2017, *The Principles of Designing Hospital Hotel with the Approach of Health Tourism in Kish Island. Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 6(1), pp. 515-531

Travel with the health purpose can be essential for certain tourists, especially in cases like complex surgeries, or the need to travel to warm and dry climates to recover from asthma or tuberculosis [12].

Medical tourism contains three constitutive elements: health tourism, spa tourism, and wellness tourism.

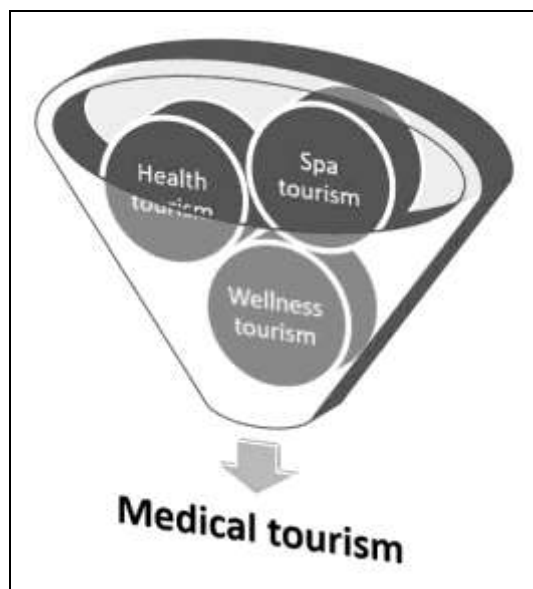


Figure 2. Medical tourism components

Today, most people in developed countries tend to travel for treatment to developing countries [13,15].

Unlike general tourists needing medical attention, medical tourists are people who cross international borders for the exclusive purpose of obtaining medical services [24]. Medical tourists are usually moving from developed countries to developing countries to get medical assistance for lower prices. These patients usually have greater purchasing power compared to the local patients from the destination countries.

In 2016 Fetscherin & Stephano [10] developed the Medical Tourism Index MTI which measures the attractiveness of a country as a medical tourist destination in terms of overall country environment; healthcare costs and tourism attractiveness, and quality of medical facilities and services. They stated that there are three main groups of factors that affect medical tourism:

1. Country environment (the overall image, political environment and economic stability of the destination country, and even language similarities or proximity to residence)
2. Medical and tourism industry factors (healthcare system in the host country, its costs and the attractiveness of the country as a tourism destination)
3. Quality of facilities and services (the quality of the medical institution itself, as well as the services offered by the doctors and nurses)

For many patients, the tourist and medical factors are equally important. The patient will be able to relax during a vacation, especially when the procedure is one that does not require a long recovery period.

Thus we need to understand that the medical tourists are not just travelling for their health problems, they are also visiting the locations they arrive to and during their vacation. Though there are situations when the patients are not accessing the leisure tourism packages, mainly due to the discomfort they suffer during their stay.

Medical tourism has a local, regional and even diasporic scale, with the potential to become more global [7,11].

The most important medical tourism destinations are located in Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East, Asia, and South America.

Table 1

Popular medical tourism destinations around the world

Europe	Middle East	The Americas	Asia & Oceania	Africa
Belgium	Israel	Argentina	China	South Africa
Germany	Jordan	Bolivia	India	
Hungary		Brazil	Malaysia	
Lithuania		Columbia	Philippines	
Poland		Costa Rica	Singapore	
		Jamaica	Thailand	
		Mexico		
		United States		

Source: adapted from Ben-Natan M., Ben-Sefer E. and Ehrenfeld M., 2009, *Medical Tourism: A New Role for Nursing*. In: *The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, Vol. 14, No. 3

The study analyzing the 2016 Medical Tourism Index written by Fetscherin and Stephano [10] reveals that Canada leads with a 76.62 score, being followed by the United Kingdom (74.87), Israel (73.91), Singapore (73.56), and India (72.10).

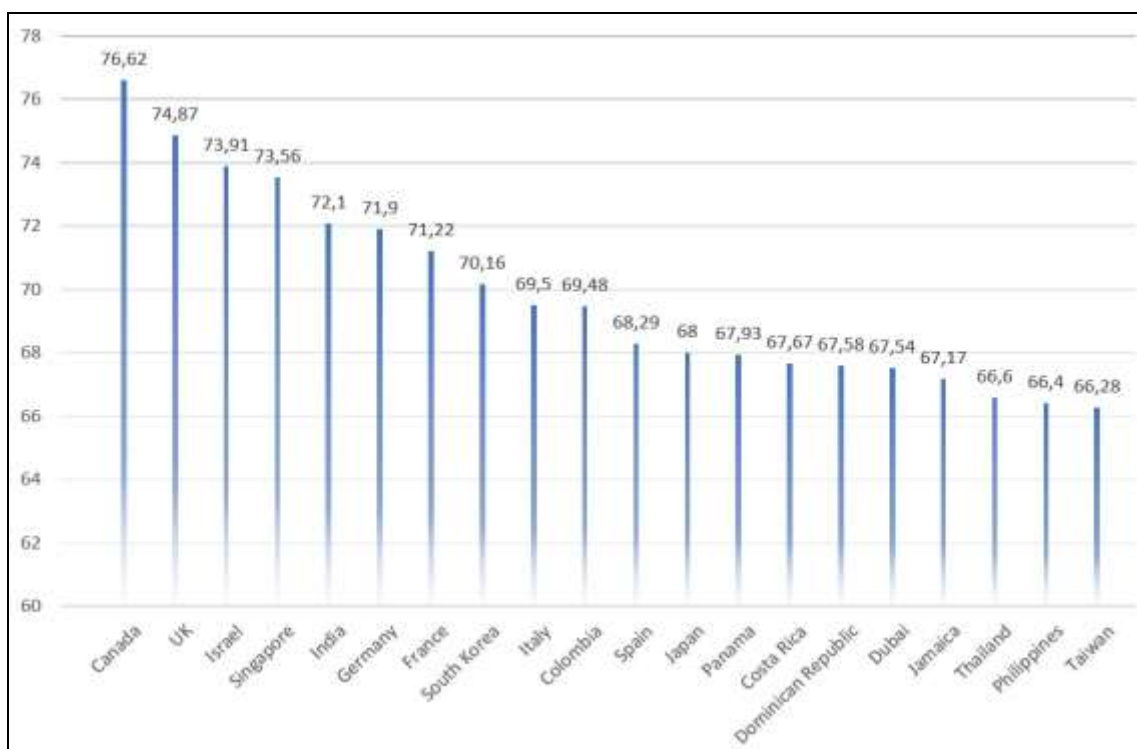


Figure 3. 2016 Medical Tourism Index Overall Ranking

Source: adapted from Fetscherin, M., Stephano, R.M., 2016, *Medical tourism index: Scale development and validation*, *Tourism Management*, 52, pp. 539-556

In 2017 Medical Tourism Association [20] realized another Medical Tourism Index study titled "Europe-Overall MTI score" where the leader is United Kingdom with a 74.87 score, followed by France with a score of 71.22, Italy (69.5), Spain (68.29), Germany (67.5), Poland (63.79), Malta (62.97), Turkey (59.49) and Russia (57.01).

According to Williams & Shaw, with an increase in the number of older people in Europe and North America, there will be a new stimulus for health tourism [35].

Lunt, Horsfall & Hanefeld [19] estimate that there are about 50 million medical tourists annually worldwide, and the whole sector of medical tourism is expected to grow by about 18.4% by 2025. At the same time by 2025 the Eastern European Market is expected to reach numbers of approximately \$27,698.4 million [4].

CONCLUSIONS

Medical tourism industry has benefited international patients with a wider spectrum which include travel and tourism, commercial sector, government relationships and international accreditation sector [23].

One of the advantages of medical tourism is that it is less influenced by seasonality than other tourism sectors. Other advantages include reduced costs, higher quality medical care, anonymity, shorter waiting times, permissiveness of the legislation etc.

Disadvantages may involve the risks which patients might be assuming when travelling to another country to get medical treatment, lack of or insufficient post-operative follow-up, possible difficulties and troubles in obtaining compensations in case of malpractice, patients suffering complications or even dying from their surgeries, all these combined with the lack of international quality standards [25,29,31].

On the other hand this type of medical care might affect the local residents „if local health professionals devote their time to treatment of foreigners rather than local communities” [31].

Melendez and Alizadeh [21] observe that medical tourism is a price-driven phenomenon that often appeals to a subset of patients who may not be educated about the importance of outcomes and complication rates.

The medical tourism market, especially after the insurance companies started to settle the bills issued by the medical offices in different countries, is led by factors such as the high cost of treatment in some developed countries, the unavailability of effective treatments in developing countries, and the aging population.

Inexpensive medical services in the destination countries attract foreign tourists from developed countries, and besides the money destined for the medical care itself, they also allocate substantial amounts for travel and relaxation.

One thing that might be interesting to observe would be the influence of the Covid-19 coronavirus over the tourism sector in general and medical tourism in particular. Even with the recent pandemic the tourism sector will recover, and especially medical tourism, as it has a very important role in many people's lives.

Medical tourism is growing worldwide, remaining one of the fastest developing sectors of the world tourism industry, many countries involved in this process having top quality medical services as well as convenient prices for the thermal, spa, and wellness facilities, but also for dental, cosmetic, and other medical treatments.

In the end medical tourism can be the perfect mixture between the attributes of a nice vacation, together with the affordable top quality medical services offered in other countries.

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