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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN BULGARIA -CONTRIBUTION FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF HEALTHCARE

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**Abstract:** The article give a direction and information about the medical tourism industry. Medical tourism includes diagnosis, treatment, cure, and prevention and rehabilitation. Medical tourism is a type of service sector, united the health care sector and the tourism industry. there is cooperation between healthcare specialists and patients and clients. Medical Tourism has a place in the process of integration service models, related to the clients/patients communication and a supportive role in the healthcare system. The medical tourism industry in the world is rapidly expanding. Governments in popular medical tourism destinations have implemented policies and strategies to attract international patients. These strategies include investing in healthcare infrastructure, enhancing the quality of medical services, and promoting medical tourism through marketing campaigns. The idea of the authors is to research the factors connected with the chain of the services in medical tourism sector. On the second place - to determine the prerequisites for improving the quality of healthcare services through cross skills and interactions with the hospitality industry and to provide the best possible patient experience. The main emphasis was put on stating the conditions stimulating the development of this sector of the economy. The authors' suggestions will allow opening a new opportunity for the healthcare providers to improve their quality, to increase the cultural competence and upgrade their services according to the requirements of the international patients. Important impulse changing the way of thinking about medical tourism and the influence over the healthcare was the participation of Bulgaria in the European Union. The authors' suggestions will also describe how the development of the medical tourism in Bulgaria can also contribute to the development of healthcare facilities and services in destination countries, as providers strive to meet the needs and expectations of international patients. This can lead to improvements in the quality of healthcare and the adoption of advanced medical technologies/ including artificial intelligence/.

**Keywords:** healthcare, medical tourism, quality, medical competence, cross skills, artificial intelligence.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of a good health status is a common reason for the patients to travel in a foreign country. Sometimes the customers starts on a very early stage, looking for the best options for medical check ups/part of the preventive medicine, in other cases they are looking for a medical treatment or rehabilitation in a country with reputation, technologist and here is the touch between two main systems – healthcare industry care and tourism industry. Services of the two systems refer to a derived system that represents a special interest tourism so called health tourism. The last ten years have seen an increasingly sustainable development of health tourism (Mainil, Eijgelaar, Jeroen, Nawijn & Peeters, 2017). Established and emerging destinations are increasingly exploiting the potential of this tourism segment, seeking to diversify to increase revenues and cope with seasonality. According to the World Health Organization's forecast, by 2030, tourism, along with the healthcare industry, will be one of the most important economic sectors (European Parliament, 2017).

Medical tourism as a part of the health tourism product mix needs to be observed carefully and with the specific approach when creating the marketing plan for promoting the health tourism destination. All socio-economic conditions must be assessed. (Kostadinova & Katsarova, 2019). The theoretical background and discussion presented in this article were done with reference to respective publications and web-sites. (*Oliver Kezar, University of Zagreb, January 2011 Zagreb International Review of Economics and Business*).

Public policies, private funds and programs target to improve the health status of their customers, and in many cases also support traveling in a foreign country for health reasons.. Domestic and national programs are often open the possibility for local/within the territory of the country/ and/or international health tourism (e.g. investments, incentives or regulations), especially if supported and facilitated by a relevant organization, e.g. an industry-led group or a government ministry (World Health Organization,2021).

Tourism is considered as a powerful life force for economic and social development. The tourism sector stimulates economic growth both nationally and internationally, increasing employment and investment, with the export of services developing in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Being in between the two sectors, healthcare and tourism, medical tourism can support the governments, who are aiming to develop their countries as health tourism destinations to implement policies and strategies to attract international patients. These strategies include investing

in healthcare infrastructure, enhancing the quality of medical services, and promoting medical tourism through marketing campaigns. The priority was put on creating of norms for motivating the development of this industry, part of the economy.

The development of medical tourism allows to the destinations to open new possibility for the healthcare providers to improve their quality, to increase the cultural competence and upgrade their services according to the requirements of the international patients (Supriadi, Al Aufa, Nurfikri & Koire, 2024).

Being in between the healthcare and the tourism the development of the medical tourism from the side of the destinations benefits from, medical tourism

## 2. KEY DRIVING FACTORS FOR MEDICAL TOURISM DESTINATION.

Medical tourism: A specialized form of tourism referring to people who travel to a country other than their own to receive medical treatment (Medical Tourism Association,2024).

There are 3 primary factors that drive medical tourism to hospital/clinic and destinations. (Vinayak Bali Medical Tourism Market Report 2025 (Global Edition).

- **Destination environment.** The following factors determine medical tourism attractiveness of the destination (Al Aufa, Nurfikri,& Koire,2024).

a/ Economic factors (the cost of medical expenditures, destination competitiveness, economic diversification);

b/ cultural and social factors (tourism experience, geographical location);

c/ healthcare infrastructure;

d/ quality standards;

e educational system /in the both industries/;

f/ marketing strategies (branding);

- **Medical tourism Industry.** The success of medical tourism depends on the involvement of numerous stakeholders and their collaboration at different levels. Medical tourists, healthcare providers, government organizations, facilitators, accreditation and credentialing bodies, insurance companies, medical marketers, and infrastructure and facilities make up the 8 main stakeholders in the medical tourism sector. Furthermore, according to organizational theory, an organizational entity—including hospitals that offer medical tourism services—is interdependent and engages in macro- and micro-level interactions with other entities(World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2019).

- **Quality of facilities and services.** Quality of medical services has a significant impact on attracting medical tourists. Today the assessing and improving quality of services is one of the basic task f the management in the service sector. Continuous quality improvement of the hospital services is a basic requirement of medical tourism industry.

## 3. GROUP OF PATIENTS TRAVELING FOR MEDICAL REASONS:

There are two main group of patients traveling for medical reasons.

a) First type: free movement of patients traveling independently, having different motivations:

- Price – looking for a better price for specific medical treatment;
- Looking for a shorter time to access specialized medical treatment (the waiting list in a number of European countries is long for elective surgeries – prostate laser, pelvic floor, etc.);
- Seeking higher quality treatment;
- Lack of access to treatment in their own country. Due to restrictions or prohibitions in the legislation (or church) in their own country (reproductive treatment, abortions);

6/ Second type: patients traveling to a foreign country, subsidized by the state, which is unable to provide the necessary medical service;

## 4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN BULGARIA, A PREREQUISITE FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF HEALTHCARE.

Important impulse changing the way of thinking about medical tourism and the influence over the healthcare was the participation of Bulgaria in the European Union/Jan 2007/. Bulgaria is also a full member of the Schengen Area/Dec 2024/, which further facilitates free movement between member states, and is expected to be a full member of the Eurozone from January 1, 2026.

Bulgaria has a number of key advantages that can establish it as a preferred destination for medical tourism in Central and Eastern Europe. The country has highly qualified and experienced medical specialists, many of whom have international qualifications and practice in foreign medical institutions. Healthcare services are affordable, and

the quality of treatment in a number of clinics and hospitals is not inferior to that in Western Europe. The country is also rich in natural resources, which allow for easy combination of treatment with rehabilitation. An additional plus is the rich cultural heritage, the diverse and authentic cuisine, the relaxed pace of life and the good transport connections with the rest of Europe. Bulgaria is also a full member of the Schengen Area, which further facilitates free movement between member states, and is expected to be a full member of the Eurozone from January 1, 2026.

Bulgaria is a popular tourist destination with its summer sea holiday tourist product and ski tourism. The international markets like Bulgaria due to the very good balance between price and quality, friendly climate, rich culture, modern hotel's infrastructure, good quality of the food and the good quality of the service in most Bulgarian hospitality industry. The destination is safe to travel and the hospitality in the tourism sector is among the advantages of the country.

Last 15 years the country starts developing health tourism, based on the natural healing recourses-remedies the country has /healing waters over 600 mineral springs with different mineralization up to 103oC and healing climate/, historical traditions and very good educational system in the field (Angelova & Katsarova, 2020). The national regulation in the sector of the health tourism was created in 2016<sup>th</sup> with the support of the ESPA. Nowadays can be seen with the updated version as a part of the Tourism Act Reg. No. 04-14 OF OCTOBER 9, 2019 ON THE CONDITIONS AND PROCEDURE FOR CERTIFICATION OF "BALNEOTHERAPY (MEDICAL SPA) CENTER", "SPA CENTER", "WELLNESS CENTER" AND "THALASSOTHERAPY CENTER" Issued by the Minister of Tourism and the Minister of Health and published in the State Gazette No. 83 of October 22, 2019. (Republic of Bulgaria, *Tourism law* ,2020).

According to the official information from the Ministry of Tourism, till the end of June 2025 the certified centers are as follows: **185 certified centers (40 Medical spas; 110 –spa centers and 35 – Wellness centers)**. This creates excellent conditions for rehabilitation programs, therapy of chronic diseases such as arthritis, neurological, respiratory and gastroenterology conditions, recovery after surgical interventions or simply relaxation in a healthy environment.

In September, 2019 with a letter the association of the public-private health insurance funds in Germany - GKV added **Bulgaria as the 15<sup>th</sup> country** where the insured customers with German health insurance can receive medical outpatient services and between 90% and 100% of the costs for the ambulant medical services in Bulgaria are subject of payment from the health insurance fund /example TK, Alliance, BKK.../. The approval of the quality in the outpatient medical care was an important step in the process of rebranding the image of Bulgaria as a destination for 365 days health tourism and create the opportunity for international patients using their health insurances. In 2023, private insurance companies from Austria recognized the high quality of services for recovery and rehabilitation in Bulgaria, and the first contracts between Bulgarian investors and private insurance companies in Bulgaria have already been concluded (Katsarova,2024) .

Bulgaria has a number of strategic and practical advantages that, with good planning and communication, can position it as a preferred medical travel destination for international patients.

The existence of a regulatory framework for certification of medical facilities guarantees standardization and traceability of the quality of services. Depending on the status and purpose of the specific facility, registration and control are carried out by the Ministry of Health or by the Ministry of Tourism together with the Ministry of Health. In addition, there is a regulatory framework for licensing and control of medical facilities, carried out by the Ministry of Health, which guarantees traceability, quality and transparency - essential elements for establishing Bulgaria as a reliable destination for medical tourism.

The quality of medical services is among the leading factors that determine the level of the readiness from the side of a country in the field of medical tourism. Highly qualified and experienced medical specialists work on the territory of the country, many of whom have international qualifications and practice in foreign medical institutions. Bulgarian doctors, for their part, enjoy high trust both in the country and abroad, thanks to their significant theoretical training acquired at the medical universities in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Plevan, Burgas, Stara Zagora, as well as the rich clinical experience gained in real hospital conditions. A large number of medical institutions implement systems for management of the quality according to standards such as ISO 9001, as well as risk management and patient safety systems.

Some medical institutions are accredited according to international standards - GCR Accreditation and Joint Commission International (JCI). In this context, Bulgaria has a number of structural, human resources and technological advantages, which are a good basis for the development of an effective, sustainable and patient-oriented healthcare model. The experience of the people involved in the tourist sector can be combined with the efforts of the management of the hospitals to build teams serving the requirements of the international patients starting for the entrance of the destination (airports).

The quality of medical care is among the leading factors that determine a country's competitiveness in the field of medical tourism. For developing a sustainable and patient-oriented healthcare model in the field of the medical tourism number of factors are with significant importance (Healthcare Research Center, 2025).

- Regional differences to be determined and the advantages of each one to be
- The administrative constraints /regulatory and administrative barriers, difficult access to information in a foreign language/;
- Investments in digitalization -extremely important for the pre and post treatment stage of the communication with the specialists.
- Human resources - training and educational programs from the tourism to be integrated in the educational program of the healthcare and vice versa. Training and development of human resources and interdisciplinary teams.
- Transparency - hospitals, facilitators, and even destination put first: Transparent, advance pricing without surprise charges. Honest, open communication about procedures, expected recovery, and risks. Physician credentials and facility accreditations available upon request (Bali, 2025).
- Effective coordination between the health care and tourist market. Possibility of "combined" medical packages. Offers with a combined medical procedure/treatment with airport transfer, hotel accommodation, translation of medical documentation, assistance with administrative formalities, etc.
- International marketing. Successful marketing campaigns require understanding the target audience's preferences and crafting tailored messages that resonate with them based on the specific demographics, medical conditions, or geographic regions. Cross marketing campaign integrated with the unique selling points of Bulgaria as a tourist destination with the innovations, the quality and accessibility of the healthcare service providers are key element of the promotion of the destination (McLennan, Ritchie, Ruhanen & Moyle,2014) .
- Partnerships. Forming strategic partnerships with key stakeholders in the medical tourism ecosystem can help from one side the recognition of the destination from more patients and from the other side to improve the quality in the services offered by the medical travel providers. These partnerships may include collaborating with medical travel facilitators, insurance companies, employers, and other healthcare providers. The partnership between academy and business as a bearer of new opportunities for the development of medical tourism (Ramanaukas, Banevičius & Jerochina-Labanauskienė, 2023).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The integrated approach to the medical tourist is the key for a successful development of Bulgaria as a competitive medical tourist destination. The expansion of Medical Tourism led Bulgaria, having a network of private medical institutions providing medical services on an international level. Bulgaria, by supporting the development of Medical Tourism, should conduct a comprehensive market research (the basis for a strategic development of medical tourism), develop contacts with the stakeholders of the medical tourism market, build an informational system concerning safety and quality of medical procedures, develop an information platform on available medical services and a coherent international system of accreditation and certification of service providers taking part in medical tourism.

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