

TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Summary

This article provides a detailed analysis about the current status and trends shaping the development of medical tourism in the Republic of Moldova. According to international practice, the medical tourism is presently considered to be a strategic sector for developing countries. During the last 5 years, it was the tourism segment with the highest growth worldwide to contribute to Moldova's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Thus, Moldova would benefit from medical tourism development opportunities, offering lower cost prices, highly-qualified medical staff and large spectrum of touristic attractions than other European countries.

Keywords: medical services, medical tourism, patients, medical tourists

Rezumat

Tendențele în dezvoltarea turismului medical în Republica Moldova

În acest articol a fost realizată o analiză a situației actuale a turismului medical, precum și a tendințelor de dezvoltare a acestuia în Republica Moldova. După cum demonstrează practica internațională, turismul medical este considerat în prezent un sector strategic pentru dezvoltarea economică a țărilor în curs de dezvoltare, deoarece aduce beneficii substanțiale produsului intern brut, fiind segmentul din turism cu cea mai rapidă creștere la nivel mondial în ultimii 5 ani. Republica Moldova ar putea beneficia, având oportunități de dezvoltare prin prețuri mai mici decât în alte țări europene, pregătirea de înaltă calitate a personalului medical, precum și prin oferirea unui spectru de atracții turistice.

Cuvinte-cheie: servicii medicale, turism medical, pacienți, turiști medicali

Резюме

Тенденции развития медицинского туризма в Республике Молдова

В данной статье был проведён анализ текущей ситуации в сфере медицинского туризма, а также тенденций его развития в Республике Молдова. Как показывает международная практика, медицинский туризм в настоящее время считается стратегическим сектором для экономического развития развивающихся стран, поскольку он приносит существенные выгоды в валовый внутренний продукт и является сегментом туризма с самым высоким уровнем роста в мире за последние 5 лет. Республика Молдова может получить преимущества, располагая возможностями для развития благодаря более низким ценам по сравнению с другими европейскими странами, высокому качеству подготовки медицинского персонала, а также предлагая широкий спектр туристических достопримечательностей.

Ключевые слова: медицинские услуги, медицинский туризм, пациенты, медицинские туристы

Introduction

Medical tourism has several thousand of years of history. In Ancient Greece, pilgrims and patients from all over the Mediterranean came to the Sanctuary of the God of medicine, Asklepios, at Epidaurus. In Roman England (also known as Britannia, the southern part of the island of Great Britain controlled by the Roman Empire between 43 and 410 AD), patients have appelled to the healing powers of the water in the temple of Bath [4,p.62]. In the 18th century, wealthy Europeans went to SPAs for treating gout, bronchitis, or liver disease.

For decades, patients around the world have been traveling to various international destinations to find the best possible treatment in terms of quality and price. In turn, the growing cost of treatments in developed countries has stimulated a new demand: quality treatment at low costs, combined with traditional tourism. The high cost of healthcare in the developed world is a significant problem for citizens, employers, employee funds, insurance systems and governments. This fact has shaped the medical tourism industry over the last decade [7,p.59].

Medical tourism can be defined as the provision of "cost-effective" private medical care, in collaboration with the tourism industry, for patients who need surgical interventions and other forms of specialized treatment [8,p.41].

Medical tourism is increasingly accessed by people who want the best quality medical services. Israel and Turkey are important destinations for medical tourism due to top services, highly qualified staff and top innovation in the medical field. Traveling to these destinations for medical purposes can be done both for periodic examinations, for complex surgical interventions, as well as for innovative medical treatments. Where the physical presence of the patient is not mandatory, the connection with the doctors can also be done remotely.

Preferred destinations for medical tourism are: Asian and African countries (Thailand, India, Malaysia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Singapore, Hong Kong), Europe (Turkey, Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, Cyprus, Portugal) and South America (Mexico, Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, Costa Rica, Argentina, Bo-

livia, Dominican Republic, Panama, Peru, Uruguay, Guatemala). Romania receives tourists interested in spa treatment, dental interventions and cosmetic surgery procedures. Most customers come from the US, UK and France. Worldwide, medical travel is a very dynamic sector, and there are even agencies specializing in medical tourism.

The purpose of the article is to examine the connection between tourism and healthcare services, emphasizing the ways these sectors mutually shape and support each other. The research contributes to identify new ways of development in medical tourism, clarifies the categories of medical services involved, and investigates how medical tourism adapts and transforms in the context of current socio-economic changes.

Material and methods

The research used bibliographic materials, scientific studies and national and international statistical reports relevant to medical tourism. The research methodology was based on a comparative analysis of sector indicators and specialized literature synthesis in the Republic of Moldova and

Republic of Moldova required a systematic review of the specialized literature. The main criteria of the research and selection of the article are the keywords "medical tourism"; "medical services"; "medical tourists".

Results and Discussion

The specialized literature defines medical tourism as *international medical services which involve a trip* (Fedorov et al., 2009, Cormany and Baloglu, 2010, Crozier and Baylis, 2010), *outsourcing of medical services across borders* (Jones and Keith, 2006), *medical refugees* (Milstein and Smith, 2006) and even biotech pilgrims (Song, 2010).

From the above, medical tourism has several connotations; its analysis is much more complex compared to other forms that have a structure focused only on tourism. The existence of numerous published studies shows that currently there is no clarity on the definition of medical tourism; therefore we will present several points of view (table no. 1).

According to the data of table 1, we can mention that there is no definition for medical tourism, but most specialists accept the fact that this term

Table 1.

Typology of definitions for medical tourism

| Authors | Definitions |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Glinos et al., 2011, p. 1146 | It includes the concept of traveling but does not capture the seriousness that results from patient mobility |
| Kangas, 2010, p.350 | A term that suggests spending free time to restore health, disregarding the suffering that patients go through |
| Jagyasi, 2009, p. 1 | Those activities related to a person who often travels long distances across the border to receive medical services, with direct or indirect involvement in free time |
| Whittaker, 2008, p. 272 | Misnomer, as the connotation of pleasure is not always associated with this type of travel |
| Yap, Chen, and Nones (2008) | Patients who travel abroad to receive medical treatment or have periodic medical examinations |
| Bookman. s. 2007, p. 1 | An economic activity that involves trade in services and represents the combination of at least two sectors: medicine and tourism. |
| Lee and Spisto (2007) | Tourism activity that involves a medical procedure combined with activities that promote tourist well-being |
| Carrera and Bridges (2006) | Countries that intend to provide health care services promoting or restoring personal health through medical intervention |
| Connell (2006) | Patients who go abroad for medical and surgical treatment |
| Tram (2006) | People who go to another country for a period of at least 24 hours for the treatment of diseases, health maintenance (yoga, massage), beauty (plastic surgery) and fertility treatment. |
| Goodrich&Goodrich (1987:217) | The vertical development of some tourist products by tour operators that also contain health services |

Source: [4,p.21]

other countries, statistical data analysis on the flow of foreign tourists, as well as the inductive-deductive method in formulating conclusions. The analysis of development trends of medical tourism in the

is used to mean a trip which motivation involves a medical procedure or activities that promote the physical and mental well-being of men.

The World Tourism Organization has defined

medical tourism – people who travel to benefit from advanced health services in other countries or regions. The first definitions of medical tourism refer to a variety of tourism activities for the maintenance of health.

Medical tourism in the Republic of Moldova

The Republic of Moldova, as a tourist destination, has a rich potential for its visitors. Tourism can indeed improve a state's *balance of payments* by increasing the export of tourist services. The tourism product of the country represents a complex environment, both natural and created by people (heritage, culture, activities, and services for visitors).

In the Republic of Moldova, medical tourism started in 2009. Until the 2000s, the quality of medical services in the country was underestimated, but not inferior to competitors from European countries such as Germany, France and Italy. As of 2017, the government has contributed to the industry but did not regulate the industry. Frequent clinics' patients in Moldova are tourists from Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Turkey, Bulgaria and Israel, as shown in table 2.

Table 2.

Main Countries of Provenance of Patients in Moldovan Clinics

| o/n | Countries | Total percentage of tourists/ % |
|-----|-----------|---------------------------------|
| 1. | Romania | 19,3 |
| 2. | Hungary | 8,0 |
| 3. | Poland | 5,7 |
| 4. | Turkey | 2,0 |
| 5. | Bulgaria | 1,4 |
| 6. | Israel | 1,2 |

According to the data presented in table 2, we can mention that the majority of medical tourists are from Romania – 19.3%, followed by Hungary – 8.0%, Poland – 5.7%, Turkey – 2.0%, Bulgaria – 1.4 % and Israel – 1.2% [2,p.56].

Every year, the industry becomes more popular and the number of medical tourists exceeds 30% of the total number of patients in Moldovan clinics. Foreign citizens come to Moldova for quality tourism services they cannot receive or pay for in their own country. Treatment of complex diseases is expensive in Europe or America. In Moldova, private clinic offer high-quality treatment at lower prices than hospitals abroad [3,p.39].

Types of medical tourism in the Republic of Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova, not only medical tourism is relevant, but also diagnostics and wellness. Patients from other countries can undergo a qualita-

tive examination in local clinics, as well as select and visit one of dozens of health resort destinations in Moldova [5,p.57].

Disease diagnosis is performed in accordance with international medical protocols and standards [6,p.60]. Patients undergo a thorough examination in private clinics equipped with advanced diagnostic equipment, guaranteeing truthful and correct diagnoses. The tests results are given to patients in the morning, which are crucial for doctors in determining the appropriate course of treatment for a patient.

There are more than 80 resorts in the Republic of Moldova, visited annually not only by citizens of the country, but also by hundreds of foreign patients. In 2018, over 300 medical tourists received treatments care in Moldovan sanatoriums [7,p.49].

Thanks to its mild and pleasant climate, Moldova is an ideal country for rehabilitation tourism. The most famous spa resorts are the sanatoriums in the Vadul-lui-Voda town. The most popular sanatoriums are "Nistru" from the city of Camenca and "Codrul" from the Călărași district. Tourists also visit the recreation area of the *Codrii* reserve. Agencies which are directly involved in medical tourism organize special trips for foreign patients [8,p.56].

The main fields of medical tourism in the Republic of Moldova are: dentistry, viral hepatitis C treatment, ophthalmology, plastic surgery, family planning. Providing these services in other countries involves high costs that are not covered by medical insurance, so patients are forced to seek treatment abroad.

Dentistry

Moldovan dental services are the most requested among foreign patients. This is explained by the fact that even the simplest dental procedures abroad are expensive. In Moldova, the pricing policy for dental services is less rigid, but from the point of view of quality, they are not inferior to European ones. According to Moldovan dentists, over 70% of their patients are foreigners [9,p.45]. Every month more than 50 customers come from Italy, France, America and Russia. Patients receive the full package of services: tooth restoration, dentures, caries treatment, teeth removal and whitening.

Online remote medical consultations are provided for medical tourists, as well as medical tours in Moldova, which include ticket purchases, hotel reservations and sightseeing tours. For foreign patients, a preliminary course of treatment is established and the approximate cost of the therapy and the length of the patient's stay in Moldova are determined.

Hepatitis C treatment

Hepatitis C treatment in the Republic of Moldova is one of the main directions of medical tourism in the country. Between 1997 and 2012, the number of people infected with hepatitis C in the country reached a critical scale - more than 40,000 people. These are very high rates, considering that the population is 4,057,420 people [10,p.24]. With the launch of the National Program for the Treatment of Viral Hepatitis, morbidity and mortality statistics decreased from 6.14% to 1.32% per 100,000 populations [11,p.45].

In 2018, over 4,000 patients received free treatment for hepatitis C in Moldova [12]. Moldovan hepatologists, who annually provide treatment to thousands of local citizens, also help foreign patients. In the Republic of Moldova, the sale of generic drugs, which cannot be bought in other countries, is officially authorized. Moldova belongs to countries with a low level of development and a wide spread of viral hepatitis among the population, therefore the prices of medicines are more affordable here [12].

Diagnosis of hepatitis C in Moldova is carried out in accordance with international standards, using modern equipment and technologies. The following methods are used to detect hepatitis C: PCR diagnosis, general and biochemical blood tests, fibro scanning, ultrasound, liver biopsy. The results are given to the patient in his hands, and the attending physician is engaged in deciphering the tests and makes a detailed course of treatment [14,p.22].

In Moldova, foreign patients are examined in private clinics and then undergo treatment, which includes generic treatment, which includes active substances - sofosbuvir, daclatasvir, ledipasvir, velpatasvir. The results of the use of antiviral therapy reach 97% of completely cured patients, and the drugs produce minimal side effects [12,p.12].

Ophthalmology

Ophthalmology and the treatment of eye diseases are widely used throughout the world. In private clinics in Chisinau, patients are offered high-precision diagnostics of visual acuity, measurement of intraocular pressure, biometrics and tonometry of the eye. Medical tourists are attracted by the presence of modern ophthalmological equipment, with the help of which Moldovan doctors make the correct diagnosis, and the treatment is carried out by new, minimally invasive methods.

Laser vision correction procedures require that they be conducted by a highly qualified specialist using modern equipment. There are more than 20 clinics in Moldova where experienced doctors work, offering a wide range of ophthalmological services for citizens and non-residents [13,p.30].

Plastic surgery

Plastic surgery in Moldova is in demand among patients from abroad. This direction involves the use of the latest technologies and equipment, and Moldovan surgeons have proven to be highly qualified and experienced specialists [13,p.31]. In the Republic, cosmetic surgery services are provided only in a few private clinics, but this area is developing progressively. The most popular operations are breast surgery and facelift, which are seven times more expensive in Europe than in Moldovan clinics [14,p.18].

Family planning

Family planning is a complex and long-term process that must take place under the supervision of an experienced specialist. Private centers in Moldova had a good reputation in this field. In addition to a wide range of gynecological and pediatric services, private clinics in the country – TerraMed, Repromed, Medpark – use modern methods of overcoming infertility, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF). Moldovan doctors contributed to the birth of over 2,000 children [16,p.14].

Medical tourism has grown significantly in recent years, if in 2008, 29 foreigners came on this occasion, then in just the first 3 months of this year 2023 - more than 200 foreigners were treated with us.

For example, in the Republic of Moldova, a dental implant costs around 300 euros, in Romania 700, and in France, it reaches 2,000 euros. This difference marks us well on the medical map of the world [2,p.21].

Moldovans might be leaving the country to seek medical treatment elsewhere, while at the same time patients from abroad are coming to Moldova for healthcare services. There is no paradox: foreigners are attracted by the quality of specialists and treatments costs significantly more affordable. Dental practices are the most cost-effective services.

The Medical Tourism Association was launched in the Republic of Moldova in 2022. The purpose of founding the Medical Tourism Association of Moldova is to encourage and facilitate the access of foreign patients to the medical services provided in our country, but also to facilitate the access of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova to quality medicine from outside the country [2,p.3].

According to its Statute, the Medical Tourism Association of Moldova will contribute to the modernization of the healthcare system in the Republic of Moldova, and the digitization and introduction of new artificial intelligence systems capable of identifying any health problem in advance, establishing an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment, making them a priority.

Every person, regardless of their background—be it race, religion, political affiliation, or economic and social status—should have access to basic health services. However, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova deserve access to state-of-the-art medical services, high-performance treatments and a healthy life. In addition, thanks to health professionals and quality services in certain medical fields - our country can become an important attraction on the world map by combining cultural and medical tourism.

The medical tourism system in the Republic of Moldova is organized in several stages – first of all, the patient receives an online consultation and then makes an appointment with a specialist and comes for treatment. The therapy and examination of foreign patients is carried out only in clinics and private medical centers located in Chisinau. More than 90 clinics and private medical offices were registered in the city in 2018. Most clinics have established medical tourism departments that handle everything from excursions and accommodation to treatment for foreign patients is a powerful development in the medical tourism industry.

International patients receive the same quality of treatment, standard of service, and professionalism that local residents do, without any extra fees or price hikes. As a security measure for the healthcare provider, it is required from the patient a deposit before treatment—which is returned at the end of the treatment.

The treatment costs vary slightly in medical institutions in the country, depending on their location and the nature of their provided services. When choosing a clinic, foreign patients evaluate its doctors' reviews and the medical center reputation.

Moldovan doctors speak Romanian and Russian well, but if necessary, an experienced translator is hired for a foreign patient to help him communicate with doctors during his stay in the Republic of Moldova. Medical tourists self-select clinics and doctors who will treat them, but they can also seek help from companies involved in the organization of medical tours.

Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive research conducted, we can conclude that the growth of medical tourism brings significant benefits not only to the healthcare sector but also to the broader tourism industry.

Besides, the promotion channel must be selected according to the segments defined by the target audience, otherwise, the marketing message will be avoided, or the information must correspond to the attitudes of the target group, because people

will filter information through their own set of values. Moreover, advertising is most effective when it first informs and arouses attention, produces interest, and then leads to awareness of the desire, and as a result, provoke a call to action of the potential buyer.

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