

Section 5. Economics of recreation and tourism

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CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN GEORGIA

Abstract. Following the latest literary sources and diverse factual materials, the present scientific article explores the challenges and development prospects of medical tourism in Georgia.

More specifically, the aim of this study is to identify the factors and challenges hindering the development of medical tourism in Georgia. It also aims to offer relevant recommendations based on the analysis of the results obtained, both in the hospital sector and on the systemic level.

Based on the study results, relevant conclusions and recommendations were made. It was established that the development of medical tourism requires the promotion and positioning of the destination country as that of medical tourism, as shown in strengthening the government involvement and its role. It is also important to develop a strategic plan for the development of medical tourism, which should ensure the integrated functioning of state agencies in this respect.

Keywords: medical tourism, medical services, telemedicine, cosmetic medicine, treatment with phages, resorts by climate, aesthetic medicine, recreational tourism.

Introductions:

Medical tourism represents a comparatively new but rapidly developing area. Its growth and other segments of tourism are very high. Medical tourism has developed a new concept of modern health: when a patient in his country cannot solve the health problem, he chooses his preferred country, doctor and clinic to enjoy modern therapeutic and diagnostic methods at an affordable price.

One of the reasons for the development of medical tourism is a lack of necessary services or low qual-

ity in their country. In such cases, patients prefer to undergo medical treatment in countries where prices are high but the medical service quality is relatively higher. Notably, in the 21st century people found themselves in exceptionally stressful conditions, including ecological disasters, viruses, terror attacks, wars and accelerated lifestyle. It's time to innovatively use the development and recovery modes mixing relaxation, recovery, entertainment, restoring the balance between physical and spiritual condition, treatment and getting well.

Medical tourism includes various areas including local, regional and global medical tourism. Telemedicine represents a type of medical tourism. It means when patients are provided with medical care in a remote mode (Such services are particularly relevant in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic). We also see an educational medical tourism when people are unable to enjoy appropriate medical education in this or that country, so, they have to leave for abroad for treatment. We see the educational medical tourism when medical staff travels abroad to raise qualification and improve practice.

Europe and North America are the main suppliers of customers to the medical tourism industry. Medical tourism occupies 65% of the world tourism market in five countries: the US, Germany, Japan, France and Austria. In terms of the number of medical tourists, the following countries are the leaders: India, Hungary, Mexico, Singapore, Thailand, Barbados, Brazil, Israel, South Korea and Turkey.

Considering the global competition of our times, medical tourism contributes to the faster development of medicine and can cause significant changes in the national health system. In this respect, it is interesting to observe the medical tourism level in modern Georgia, namely, the challenges it faces and the development prospects it follows.

Results and discussion: studies show that Georgia's tourism incomes equal \$1.7 billion through its trade turnover, and it is of utmost importance [3]. Georgia offers the following types of services for medical tourists: dentistry and teeth prosthetics, cosmetic medicine, sight correction with excimer laser, treatment of coronary heart diseases (stenting, shunting), treatment with phages (This is an exclusive species, since 'Tbilisi Bacteriophage' is one of the unique institutions across the world), reproductive health services, and others [4].

Notably, Georgia has a great potential for healing tourism as it is extremely rich in resort areas: currently, there are 102 resorts and 182 areas offering diverse disease treatment, rehabilitation and recovery.

It should also be noted that Georgia has all medical resorts where there are natural medicinal factors, like mineral water, mud, recreational climate and essential conditions for using for medicinal and preventive purposes [2].

It is possible to develop specific types of medical tourism, such as climatic (mountain, sea coast, forest and steppe) resorts and those offering balneotherapy (drinking water and bath treatment). They always represented Georgia's tourism dignity (We should notice that the development of resorts in Georgia begins at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries. During this period, the process of rebuilding tourism began in Borjomi and Abastumani, and later on the Black Sea coast. Georgian resorts were recognized as one of the best medical destinations in Soviet times).

Among the climate resorts there are: Abastumani, Akhtala, Batumi, Bakuriani, Bakhmaro, Borjomi, Green Cape, Nabeghlavi, Patara Tsemi, Sairme, Surami, Tskaltubo and Kobuleti. The balneotherapy resorts are: Borjomi, Grigoleti, Tbilisi, Nunisi, Sairme, Ureki, Utsera, Tsagveri, Tskaltubo, Tsai, Tsemi, Tsikhisdziri, Shovi, Java and many others.

Mountain climate offers fresh air, intense sun radiation, especially ultraviolet rays, low barometric pressure and a high substance of oxygen. The mountain climate acts in diverse modes: soothes and tones nervous system, improves vital processes, activates metabolism, respiratory function, blood circulation and digestion, besides, it improves immunity to various diseases, including infectious pathologies. For this factor, people spending holidays in mountain resorts show a repellent effect [11].

The Black Sea climate is humid and subtropical with good properties. It is good for the treatment of diseases of the blood circulation and respiratory, as well as functional disorders of the nervous system. Seaside resort Ureki is distinguished by its importance, magnetic sand and excellent climatic conditions for recreation and recovery. From the positive treatment factors of Ureki, we can note healing effect for cardiovascular diseases, central nervous system,

functional diseases, those of muscles, skeleton and other diseases.

Georgia has about 2000 mineral sources, with the most common being carbonated mineral waters, used to treat various disorders of the digestion system, endocrine system and metabolism. Borjomi, Sairme, Lebarde, Utsera and Shovi can be named as such resorts.

Among the mud-curing resorts stands out Akhtala. Its pseudo-volcano mud is used for baths, applications and tampons. Chronic, peripheral nervous system and gynecological diseases of limbs are treated in Akhtala.

For the maximum development of the medical tourism potential, we should analyze the challenges hindering its development.

Mainly, we should highlight a high competition level in this area. Many countries, with medical tourism quite developed cannot be competitive. In such countries, lots of funds are spent to boost medical tourism. They offer many types of medical care to users from foreign countries (Our neighbor Azerbaijan is active in this respect, which is actively investing. If we do nothing, Azerbaijani patients coming Georgia for treatment will no longer arrive here. Gradually this picture can change and not only drain patients to Azerbaijan, but also to medical staff.). In this respect, Georgia cannot be attractive [3].

The medical tourism development is hampered by poor infrastructure resources. The network of hotels and agencies has insufficiently developed and prevents tourists from providing a shelter. However, the service level of available private hotels is still low. Climate resorts are mainly in highlands where the infrastructure is not developed.

The transport system problems are also important. Despite the fact that lately particular attention is paid to the development of the road infrastructure, in most of the highland regions the road and transport system remain disrupted. Domestic flights and maritime transport are less developed, while the proper

level of development could ensure easy movement across the country.

In some areas of the Georgian coastline poor sanitary-hygienic conditions are observed. The beach is not cleaned regularly and we observe no compliance with sanitary norms. Sea pollution and various residues are also common. Naturally, all this threatens the health of the coast visitors.

Apart of that, there is no information database regarding the potential of medical tourism in Georgia. There is a comparatively low number of adverts at treatment resorts. Besides, many travel agencies, offer fewer medical tours, while the country boasts high potential.

For high competition in the field of medical tourism, it is more real for Georgia to offer specific services that do not require high investments. By setting low prices for specific services and adhering to international standards of the medical care quality, it is possible to attract foreign patients. In this respect it can become interesting, even on a regional level.

In many countries, services like aesthetic medicine and dental medical care are not covered by state health programs. Thus, if there is a proper standard and quality of medical care in Georgia at a relatively low cost, foreign citizens will aspire to the desired medical services.

It is necessary to improve the road system, especially in highlands and hardly reachable areas as the significant potential for the development of medical tourism focuses on the mountainous regions. However, it is necessary to expand the shuttle network and schedule direct routes to the mountainous regions; It is recommended to schedule intra-country, inter-regional flights, as well as restore sea flights for the transportation and ride of visitors.

Georgia should create a complete information database about the medical tourism potential and its constant update including full info about large medical institutions, clinical centers (types and prices of their services), available to any resident of the world via internet.

To enhance the quality of medical services, it is recommended to bring certain medical suppliers for the implementation of medical tourism into a unified regulation system that ensures the quality of medical services following international standards.

Unlike conventional tourism, medical tourism requires considering the peculiarities of medicine. In this respect, conduction of training courses regarding medical tourism is required by tourism employees. The training should meet international standards.

The state support for foreign patients should be ensured specifically for those (as well as accompanying persons) planning to get treatment in Georgia, impose visa benefits or be exempt from visa fees.

The Economic Ministry and National Tourism Administration of Georgia developed the national tourism strategy with the World Bank group's financial support. The strategy includes 20–25 years and defines various directions of tourism development: medical tourism, wine tourism, adventure, cultural tourism and others. One of the significant solutions of the strategy is the development of medical tourism and recreational resorts in Georgia.

According to foreign experts and experience of leading tourist countries, natural and resort factors in a rich country such as Georgia are feasible. Here the priority is the development of recreational tourism. International competition capacity of Georgia as a tourism brand can be supported by the formation and possibilities of innovative tourism products like combined wine tourism, enotherapy (treatment with wine) and ampelotherapy (treatment with grapes). Currently, in an industrial environment, the demand for such an exotic tourist product is very high.

Georgia's medical tourism requires higher attention from the government. Through our study, 37 interviews were conducted with those involved in the medical tourism industry. Based on the study results, it was determined that the government involvement is required for the medical tourism develop-

ment. Therefore, it is important to develop a strategic plan, which should ensure the integrated operation of government authorities. There is a need to tighten the regulation and control of the quality of medical services, stimulate the acquisition of international accreditation by medical institutions and affiliation with international medical networks.

It is also recommended to introduce international treaties regulating medical tourism, to participate more intensely in international medical tourism forums, to create joint medical organizations with the involvement of foreign companies competing with private clinics in terms of the medical care cost.

Finally, through the proper positioning, medical tourism will attract quite a high number of tourists during the year and will become one of the important mechanisms for the economic growth.

Conclusion: Based on the study outcomes, the following recommendations were made for the development of Georgia's medical tourism: (1) to destine the country as a medical tourism, position and promote the target markets for Georgia to be perceived globally as a medical tourism provider; (2) to improve the government's involvement and role in the development of medical tourism, to develop the appropriate strategy by the government; (3) the government must ensure quality control, standardization and regulation of medical services, for which it is required to introduce an accreditation system and stimulate international accreditation; (4) improve cooperation and coordination with medical institutions by facilitator companies and intermediary agencies, qualify their management and administrative staff through targeted training regarding the specifics and needs of medical tourism; (5) to facilitate air travel to the target countries by stimulating scheduling direct flights; (6) to improve accounting of medical tourists visiting the country, to established required necessary information input on services provided to foreign patients in statistical reports of medical institutions.

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