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ASPECTS REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DENTAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Current economic developments, marked by the recession of the recent years have led directly to the emergence of some social issues with major implications on the world tourism. As a niche segment of the tourism industry, dental tourism is a relatively new phenomenon. The paper is founded on the study and analyze of content of different information and promotion sites for dental tourism, in order to identify the types of dental services and of the other components of the offer. Also the research has in view to identify factors of influence and the motivations that may cause this type of tourism development and the main destinations. The present paper seeks to highlight the extent of dental tourism worldwide and to identify opportunities for developing the dental tourism market in Romania.

Introduction

The concept of medical tourism is not new, although there is still no international consensus on the name of this phenomenon manifesting itself for thousands of years. Archaeological evidence indicates that since ancient Mesopotamians who travelled to the temple of god healer and the Temple of Tell Brak, Syria, looking for a cure for eye diseases and the first historical evidence of health tourism dates back over 2000 years, when pilgrims travelling from the Mediterranean to Epidaurus in the Peloponnese. There was said to be the birthplace and shrine of God of Health, Asklepios, son of Apollo. The habit of Roman belts health with water was a custom in many parts of the empire. Many spas and sacred places whose ruins are found in many parts of Europe is testimony actual of beginnings of local tourism, since people travelling from one place to another for the benefit of physical and mental health. Later in 16-17 centuries, centres SPA (Sanitas per AquaMate) has become the most sought after places "upper class", hoping these beneficent waters to cure common diseases for the period. Since the 1500s, India was known for yoga and Ayurvedic healing for patients worldwide appreciated. In the 18th and 19th centuries, many Americans and Europeans went in groups in nursing homes, sometimes in remote locations / remote, with the hope that it will cure the diseases (<http://www.semneletimpului.ro/stiri/Turismul-medical--din-ce-in-ce-mai-sanatos-6205.html>). However, movements in order to receive treatments such as dental surgery, cosmetic or other complex procedures related, are a relatively new phenomenon that began only in the 80s (Calistru, 2013). Dental tourism is the practice through which citizens of a country where dental services are extremely expensive, choose to travel to countries where dental services are very affordable.

Usually, half of the vacation is spent on getting proper medical care for cheap prices, while the other half is spent on real tourism (<http://worldental.org/dental-tourism/cheap-dental-tourism-growing-fast-romania/4025/>).

Dental tourism was at the beginning mostly a personal experience. This form of tourism was not organized like a business, except for dentists, who have offices located close to the border to be convenient for their international patients. Over time, dental tourism has evolved into a profitable business

nowadays (<http://www.dentaltourismabroad.co.uk/dental-tourism.html>).

Dental tourism development worldwide

Worldwide, the tourism market has identified new needs of tourists, which led to the emergence of new forms of tourism, such as: adventure tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism, medical tourism, etc. Current economic developments, marked by the recession of the recent years have led directly to the emergence of some social phenomenon with major implications on the world tourism. The increased unemployment in developed countries, the relatively narrow range of medical services covered by insurance, the gap between prices of such services, the increased population mobility, are direct causes of the emergence and development of new forms of medical tourism, such as the dental tourism (Cetron, DeMicco and Davies, 2009).

So far, 37 countries in four continents offer integrated medical tourism. Among countries in Africa and Middle East which offer in this area we could mention Israel, Iran, Jordan (which takes the 1st place in the area and the 5th in the world in terms of profit), United Arab Emirates and South Africa. In America, 9 countries provide quality medical services. These are the U.S.,

Panama (favoured because the national currency is the U.S. dollar), Uruguay (among the last countries which entered in the international medical services area), Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, Brazil and Canada. In the Asia-Pacific, 11 countries are offering medical tourism, including China, India, South Korea, Philippines, Thailand and New Zealand. In Europe, 12 countries represent medical tourism destinations, including Romania. Traditionally, patient flows are clearly divided: Mexico for the American patients; Thailand, India and Malaysia are the favourite destinations of Asians; Hungary and its neighbours, including Romania, defy competition with dental treatments at unbeatable prices, being the classic destinations for those who are in search of cheap interventions and often even faster than their home countries (<http://www.semneletimpului.ro/stiri/Turismul-medical--din-ce-in-ce-mai-sanatos-6205.html>).

Dental tourism is considered an example of globalization. However, movement of tourists in this area is more regional than global. People from UK get such procedures in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Poland. Americans cross the border in Arizona, California and Texas to seek dental care in Mexican border towns such as Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana. At the same time, some Americans have such cheap care in Argentina, Costa Rica, Peru, while Austrian tourism companies promoting Bangkok and Phuket in Thailand as cheap destinations for dental treatments (Turner, 2008).

The most popular destinations for affordable dental treatments are at the moment: India, Costa Rica, Mexico, Thailand, the Philippines, Hungary, Turkey, Czech Republic and Poland (<http://www.dentaltourismabroad.co.uk/dental-tourism.html>).

India, the fascinating place from the touristic point of view for people around the world,

recently won a new title, which is the top destination for medical and dental tourism. Most tourists go to India for dental procedures and cosmetic dental services (which often are not covered by the insurance policy of their country) (<http://worldental.org/dental-tourism/india-popular-hotspot-dental-tourism/4597/>). Many Americans and Canadians prefer Costa Rica for excellent prices; about 90% of cosmetic dentistry services in Costa Rica are offered to foreign tourists. There, they can get a wide range of dental services, offices being equipped with the latest technological tools and dentists are highly skilled professionals (<http://worldental.org/dental-tourism/costa-rica-popular-dental-tourism-spots/4941/>). Today, Mexico is considered one of the dental capitals of the world with high standards of care and cleanliness, low and affordable prices (<http://www.dentaltourismexpert.com/mexico-dentist.html>). In Asia, Thailand to reach the title of a main destination for dental tourism was part of a government plan. Thai Health Ministry has set this goal, which is part of the grand plan to turn the country into a health tourism capital. According to the government, about 15% of journeys for dental treatments in the world are in Thailand, which means 1.2 million tourists each year (<http://www.dentaltourismexpert.com/dentists-thailand.html>). Singapore also had huge support from his government to boost the tourism industry. Singapore Medical Council is supported by the Ministry of Health of Singapore, the Singapore Economic Development Board, International Enterprise Singapore and STB (Chew, 2010). People of European countries that have high costs of dental treatment, such as the UK, Germany, prefer travelling in Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Poland, Czech

Republic, Turkey or Romania(<http://www.articlesromania.com/health/turismul-dentar-o-industrie-in-plina-expansiune.html>).Dental tourism destinations most attractive in Europe lately proved to be Poland and Hungary,mainly due to the price.Dental tourism,one of the most popular forms of medical tourism, is hardly new in Europe. The Germans and Austrians have been going to Hungary for dentistry for years to save money. Only in Austria, one of three patients seeks a treatment in neighbouring Hungary. In the UK, half of the 52500 Britons who travel abroad for a medical treatment every year, jet off for dental treatment(<http://www.dentalhealth.org/>).In America, according to Cetron et al (Cetron, DeMicco and Davies, 2009), the trend for dental tourism is growing but is not new, as Americans have long looked for cheaper options for medical and dental treatments.Globalization transformed tourism from a seasonal activity in a needs activity.Medicine globalizing in this century also: hundreds of thousands of people travelling along and across the world in search of cheaper medical care or other services in the area, such as the tourism(Smith and Puczko,2014).Veronica English, et al (2002) argues that, although the appearance of globalization on health care has become well documented, little attention has been paid to the ethical dimensions of this process.They describe health tourism, not only like the act of travelling abroad to get treatment, but also a migration of health personnel (English, Romano Critchley, Sheather and Somerville; 2002).Dental tourism is not just a flight, accommodation and treatment plan; dental tourism phenomenon is more complex. Dental tourism is a global industry and leaders are Asian countries that have seen in this niche the financial save of local

dentistry.(<http://www.imtj.com/news/?entryd82=436848>).

Motivations and influences in the development of dental tourism

Typically, tourist services are competing indirectly the offer of durables goods because of budgetary constraint generating the opportunity cost.Medical tourism offers services that deviate from the norm, health being a priority; the range of options is so limited, the balance is tilting in favour of medical services in case of coercion of those who make the choice.In the particular case of medical tourism motivation is more linked to necessity, leisure can be obtained depending on the severity of the health problem, the main drawback remaining the income.In that way could be explained why most medical travels turned to Asia due to its ability to offer quality at prices below those of developed countries, , being a good example to support the theory of comparative costs of David Ricardo.Another significant difference to tourism in general is the lack of seasonality(<http://www.fdiworldental.org/home.aspx>).Factors that led to the increasing popularity of medical travel include the high cost of health care, long waiting time for certain procedures, the ease and affordability of international travel, as well as significant improvements in both technology and standards of care in many countries.In addition, patients have found that many times, in home countries, medical insurance either does not cover interventions or impose unreasonable restrictions on the choice of the institution.Although medical tourism exist for many years, its growth potential was reduced by constraints regarding the ability to support a limited number of tourists as well as those related to infrastructure problems (among them communications, water and sanitation,

electricity, etc.) in the destination countries (<http://worldental.org/dental-tourism/cheap-dental-tourism-growing-fast-romania/4025/>). Summarizing, we can identify five main reasons for the medical tourism demand increase (<http://www.semneletimpului.ro/stiri/Turismul-medical--din-ce-in-ce-mai-sanatos-6205.html>):

- Demographic reasons (increasing life expectancy);
- Medical reasons (there is an increasing trend in the number of non-transmissible diseases that require a specialist);
- Economic reasons (people have much higher income, have health insurance, sometimes even mobile, transferable from one country to another);
- Social reasons (people know increasingly more about the world and are more willing to travel).

As we can see, not only the price is the reason for the popularity of dental tourism, but also the fact that majority of dental treatments are completed usually within a few days and are often non invasive, unlike cardio or neurosurgery. Dental tourism service outlets promise low cost and high quality and they pitch their services to relatively affluent but cost-conscious consumers in Western Europe and the United States. It is often the case that a dental treatment is combined with a relaxing break to one of the overseas cosmetic dentistry clinics to meet one of the best cosmetic dentists abroad (<http://www.dentaltourismabroad.co.uk/dental-tourism.html>).

According to Academy of General Dentistry dental tourism might carry some risks because dentists in developing countries do not always adhere to usually higher standards of developed countries. It also argues that dental work completed abroad cannot be guaranteed and patients might have problems getting eventual

compensation because of the difference in legal systems of foreign countries (<http://www.dentaltourismabroad.co.uk/dental-tourism.html>).

Also should be noted that through dental tourism programs patients from other countries, as well as domestic ones living abroad have the opportunity to visit picturesque places in the country of destination, while benefiting from a full set of dental solutions at prices much attractive than in their home countries.

Dental tourism in Romania

Dental tourism is practiced by citizens of those countries where teeth care services are very expensive; therefore decide to travel to other countries where these services are cheaper, Romania being one of them. Dental tourism in Romania has already a well rooted tradition for years now. Even more so, there are many patients who combine their medical needs with pleasure, so they schedule their dental treatments for when they have vacation. According to several studies in the field of health tourism, Romania will become one of the most affordable spots for dental tourism because:

- ✓ Patients will encounter affordable prices for top dental services;
- ✓ Relatively short dental treatment periods;
- ✓ Dental offices are equipped with top medical technology devices;
- ✓ The dental professionals are very well trained;
- ✓ Huge innovations in the field of cosmetic dentistry are also on the line. This is particularly important, since cosmetic dentistry is the most expensive dental practice in highly developed countries, and it is a service which is usually never covered by a standard insurance policy (<http://worldental.org/dental-tourism/cheap-dental-tourism-growing-fast-romania/4025/>).

One of the main reasons for which prices are now more affordable than ever on dental care plans in Romania, is that the country is trying to build up a healthy and strong industry after the economic downturn it has recently seen.

Romania is well known for health and spa tourism, and while dental tourism numbers are on the rise, the country wants to offer a wider range of services. Thousands of people are treated in dental clinics here, which they promote by themselves. The foreign patients pay a quarter of what they would pay for these services in their country. There is an opportunity for a wider Romanian medical tourism(<http://www.imtj.com/news/?entryid82=436848>). According to several studies conducted in these areas, Romania has become one of the most affordable destinations for dental tourism. What will advise? The reasons are numerous: patients will pay amounts acceptable for top service or treatment periods are relatively short ones; the facilities are great in dental offices and doctors well trained; also, dentists are made aware of innovations in the field of cosmetic dentistry and those who want something they will be able to afford; foreigners are advised to come to Romania because the period remained free, except the treatments they can spend visiting tourist attractions(<http://worldental.org/dental-tourism/cheap-dental-tourism-growing-fast-romania/4025/>). From UK, Israel or the United States, tourists come to dental clinics in Romania not because in our country would achieve any single treatment in the world, but prices are much lower than at home. Foreigners know and appreciate quality dental care in Romania, which is as high as that of the countries of Western Europe or the U.S. We have over-specialized medical

teams with comprehensive experience in all branches of dentistry. Quality-price ratio is clearly in our favour, because the same treatments performed to the same standard, which cost over 20,000 Euros abroad, here are available at prices between 4000-10000 Euros. Patients can even reach 70% savings. The difference is significant, especially in the current economic context(Suciu,2011). It seems that the attraction is represented by the complex treatments. Among these, the most requested is the dental implant surgery followed closely by the support of zirconium ceramic crowns. Generally, foreigners are given guarantees of 10 years work, financial solutions and sometimes a free consultation at the end of work.

In order to attract patients from other countries, these cabinets deal partnerships with agencies abroad, collaborating on dental tourism programs. Very important are the recommendations of dental tourists who have already called the clinic services. Romania is not the only country in Europe attractive from this point of view. Direct competition comes from Bulgarian and Hungarian neighbours. Hungary became the last 15 years a dental tourism market leader in Europe, with a share of almost 40%. In comparison, in Romania, there is no data about dental tourism. Conversely, medical tourism (including the dental) registered last year 60 000 foreigners who came to treat in our country. Here they spent 250 million Euros on health care, according to some estimates, receipts of Romanian medical tourism could reach 500 million Euros per year since 2015(Flor nescu,2013).

However, the system says that medical tourism in Romania is much less developed. According to experts, this

niche can be a "new engine" of tourism development, if they would invest more in infrastructure, services and if there is an effective plan. It become necessary to identify those services of interest to Europe and to develop them;the directive guaranteeing free movement in the European space should provide an incentive in this respect. On the medical tourism market of 250 million dollars in Romania, those who will have the most to gain are dentists and aestheticians. However, The College of Dentists in Bucharest(CMDB)President has the opinion that dental tourism in Romania can be defined by chaos, at least in the organization. According to him, it is necessary to better communication between dentists and professional organizations of firms operating in the health tourism.The President of the College of Doctors of Romania (CMR) believes that not only private clinics can provide top foreign customers. Also state hospitals could be included in the equation, but in certain therapeutic areas(Spiridon,2013).

Currently, in Romania the dental tourism is organized and promoted both by dental clinics through their own sites and by travel agencies specialized in medical tourism.

On www.whatclinic.com/dentist/romania are cited 144 clinics that provide dentistry in Romania (www.whatclinic.com/dentist/romania).

At the present moment there are already specialized agents in dental tourism in Romania, likeSeytour Medical Tourism, with an active presence and an offer of integrated tourist and medical services packages, whose manager said: "We need to work on improving our image abroad through participation in international fairs, through an excellent presentation of our tourist offices abroad

and by finding those 'ambassadors' who know how to explain that we still have something 'unique' and 'authentic',for which they do not pay too much" (<http://turism-medical.eu>). We may also mention the existence of portals created by specialized travel agents specialized in dental tourism: www.dts.com.ro; www.dentaltouring.com, to recruit patients / tourists interested in dental tourism(<http://www.comunicatedepresa.ro/dental-touring-services/primul-portal-de-turism-dentar-din-romania-www-dts-com-ro/>, www.dts.com.ro,www.dentaltouring.com).

The analyses of a great number of sites of companies from Romania who practice dental tourism have highlighted the following content aspects:

- information available in Romanian and English language;
- use of web page or facebook like promotion media;
- offering of professional consulting services;
- offering of medical services;
- offering of touristic services,packages and programs.

Packages include services both before during and after the treatments or operations and can be adapted to each client. For example, a package all inclusive" medical tourism" includes medical advice, tourist assistance document and visa, air tickets, transfer from the airport to the private hotel, assistant Romanian or English speaking throughout the treatment guide for local visits, spa and relaxation treatments, transportation to and from the medical centre for each treatment session.It should be emphasized that patients who are interested in medical tourism in our country can be informed by visiting the website Treatment Abroad, dental

treatments being found among targets(<http://www.treatmentabroad.com/>). Many of the foreigners who providesuch services will handle also transport and accommodation arrangements, and offer low-cost airlines which must be also taken into account(<http://www.semneletimpului.ro/stiri/Turismul-medical--din-ce-in-ce-mai-sanatos-6205.html>).

In this context, in Romania becomes obvious the need for government support for the development of medical tourism in general and in particular of the dental one. The government's answers to the latter problem are an internationally recognized quality management system for those services and a new liability insurance system for those providing the related services, because the medical tourist must know how possible damage can be covered and who to contact if there is a problem. For the former problem, the government is setting up an inter-ministerial working group to draw up a national health tourism strategy (<http://www.imtj.com/news/?entryid82=436848>).

A first step was taken by a ministerial committee, which in 2013 analyzed the current problems of Romanian medical tourism in attempt to find solutions. In this respect, a memorandum was signed between the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Tourism. Also have been analyzed the current legal framework, regulatory changes and ways to promote health tourism, being necessary first to identify services of interest to Europe and beyond (Spiridon, 2013).

Romania needs to improve infrastructure and invest in the promotion of medical services to attract tourists and bring important funds from the state budget, experts say (<http://www.ziare.com/>

[articol/romania+turism+stomatologic](#)).

In this framework, the fourth edition of the Form International Health Tourism aims to facilitate contact medical tourism specialists and managers of insurance companies in Europe, with the high level of conditions offered by clinics in Romania and excellent services offered by these prices up to 50 % lower than in Western Europe. Such event held Between 21 to 23 March 2014 in Bucharest will bring together representatives of the major insurance companies in Europe, and representatives of medical units in Romania invited to offer medical services in the forum. Mr. Keith Pollard - Editor in Chief of International Medical Travel Journal, one of the most prestigious publications in the field of medical tourism in Europe will take part at the event. The activity of IMTJ and contribution to medical tourism industry through scientific and practical material published is a source of expertise and information that can be used in the benefit of medical tourism destination in Romania. During his visit to Bucharest Mr. Keith Pollard will meet with representatives of public authorities and healthcare professionals from the tourism and Romania. Besides being able to promote local development opportunities of medical tourism, International Health Tourism Forum will create a platform for communication among opinion makers in the field, which will be the basis of partnership in health tourism in general and in tourism especially medical and stimulate the development of this sector in Romania. The Forum for International Health Tourism is organized by the Romanian Government Amphitheatre Foundation in partnership with the National Authority for

Tourism(<http://www.turismuldesanatate.ro/romania-promovata-ca-o-posibila-destinatie-europeana-de-turism-medical-in-cadrul-editiei-a-iv-a-a-forumului-international-pentru-turismul-desanatate/>).

Conclusions

Dental tourism is a global industry. In Europe, Hungary and Poland already successful practice dental tourism. With the entry into the European Union, Romania has become an attractive destination for business travellers and at the same time, solving dental problems at much lower prices and quality similar to other European countries. In the context of Directive 24/2011 of the European Union on cross-border healthcare, through which all EU citizens have the right to benefit from medical treatment anywhere in the EU, and insurance companies settled these medical services to the limit established in the country of origin, Romania becomes a potential medical tourism destination in the European space. Opportunities created can be harnessed but only with adequate and targeted promotions. Government of Romania hopes to establish a quality management system to gain confidence among foreigners seeking medical treatment in Romania. One of the main reasons that prices in Romania for dental treatments are more affordable than ever is the fact that it is trying to build a healthy and strong industry after the recent crisis. Almost all clinics today have one site where it can be found offers, promotions of all kinds in the country but also abroad. But as long as this is not organized, results will never be. Factors that led to the increasing popularity of medical travel include price, time, travel and availability, and improvements in both technology and standards of care in

many countries. And most of all we must not forget that medical tourism is also a great way to spend the recovery in a relaxing and beautiful way, visiting beautiful places, without liability, which could adversely affect the recovery at home.

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