

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

APPROACHES TO HEALTH TOURISM FROM THE GEOGRAPHY. DEFINITION AND STUDY FIELD

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1. HEALTH TOURISM ORIGINS

Health travel began in ancient times, when people traveled in search of better healing remedies and cures for their illnesses (Wong and Hazley, 2020). Since antiquity, diverse civilizations have recognized the therapeutic effects of mineral hot springs and sacred temple baths. It was the Sumerians who built the first health resorts, which included magnificent, elevated temples with hot spring pools (Chistobaev and Semenova, 2018).

The curative and wellness properties, coupled with social events, dancing and gambling, converted spa towns, such as Bath, into holiday resorts (Mihalache, 2018). Sea waters began to be considered likewise beneficial for health, becoming fashionable among London's wealthy upper class (Sakula, 1995; Williams, 2009).

The interest of the health tourist today has completely changed and goes beyond the thermal water therapy in spas and in the sea. In fact, contemporary tourists are not only looking for a dip in therapeutic waters, but also for various surgical procedures to improve their health or physical appearance (Goodrich and Goodrich, 1987). Nowadays, health tourists travel to countries where medical treatments are more accessible, cheaper or of better quality and where they can enjoy other resources offered by the destination, such as climate, beaches, architectural and natural heritage, cultural attractions, or gastronomy.

2. DEFINITION OF HEALTH TOURISM

For the first time, the term medical tourism was used in the 17th century, referring to travel to a destination other than one's usual environment to receive healthcare services (Yusof *et al.*, 2019).

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines health tourism as a type of tourism activity which primary motivation is to contribute to the physical, mental and/or spiritual health through medical and health-based activities which increase the capacity of individuals to satisfy their own needs and function better as individuals in their environment and society. Health tourism includes wellness tourism as well as medical tourism. Wellness tourism is a type of tourism activity which aims to improve and balance all of the main domains of human life including physical, mental, emotional, occupational, intellectual and spiritual. On the other hand, medical tourism is a type of tourism activity which involves the use of evidence-based medical resources and services, including diagnosis, treatment, cure, prevention, and rehabilitation (World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission, 2018).

3. HEALTH TOURISM IN NUMBERS

The growth and aging of the population, together with the increase in prevalence of chronic diseases and the availability of innovative therapies, are leading to an escalation in the demand for healthcare. This is driving citizens to seek new treatments and healthcare outside their home countries, traveling in search of therapeutic alternatives that are cheaper, more accessible or of higher quality than those available in their own country.

Although there are no official global statistics on medical tourism, a report published by VISA and Oxford Economics in 2016 estimated that more than 11 million medical tourists travel each year, generating \$100 billion. This data was calculated based on the forecast that three to four percent of the world's population will travel abroad for healthcare and health-related treatments.

On the other hand, Allied Market Research, in its report "Medical Tourism Market, 2019-2027," net value of the estimated a global medical tourism market of \$104.68 billion in 2019 and is expected to rise to \$273.72 billion by 2027 (Sanjivan and Sahil, 2020).

The income generated by medical tourism should include, in addition to the expenses related to healthcare, non-health care expenses made by the medical tourist and the accompanying person for meals, accommodation, sightseeing, travel or shopping (Lunt *et al.*, 2011).

This significant increase in the number of health tourists is partly due to the development of online platforms that act as intermediaries between the tourist and the clinics or hospitals. These agencies apart from providing information on the medical treatments available in different countries around the world, carry out a complete follow-up of the health tourist and his companion through their agents, facilitating not only the procedures with the clinics, but also the management of his trip and accommodation in the country of destination (MedRetreat, 2023).

4. PRINCIPAL HEALTH TOURISM DESTINATIONS WORLDWIDE

According to the Medical Tourism Index 2020-2021, prepared by the International Center for Health Research, which ranks 46 healthcare destinations, the best destinations to travel for healthcare needs are Canada, Singapore, Japan, Spain, United Kingdom, Dubai, Costa Rica, Israel, Abu Dhabi, and India. This index assesses medical tourism destinations in terms of three dimensions: destination attractiveness, medical tourism industry,

and quality of facilities and services, always considering a destination's ability to provide quality healthcare in a safe and efficient manner (Medical Tourism, 2021).

Many emerging countries have found in health tourism a possibility to increase their income and, as a result, are investing considerably in this sector. Some destinations have opted for specialization in a certain product, as is the case of Turkey, which has become one of the leading destinations for hair transplants and aesthetic treatments among health tourists who come mainly from Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates) and Europe (Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Netherlands, United Kingdom).

When choosing their destination, health tourists consider various factors, including the availability of medical treatment, the availability of financing options, perceived quality, international connectivity, or simply the migrants' knowledge on medical and wellness treatments compared to their country of origin (Mathijssen, 2019). The diaspora likewise takes advantage of trips to visit their relatives for medical and aesthetic treatments because they have more knowledge and confidence in their home country or simply because they are looking for more affordable prices (Connell, 2013).

5. HEALTH TOURISM IN SPAIN

The health tourism market is an important pillar to boost and promote the Spain brand, with an annual growth potential of 20% (World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission, 2018). According to the Medical Tourism Index 2020-2021, and as mentioned above, Spain is one of the world's leading healthcare destinations (Medical Tourism, 2021). These data seem quite encouraging, as everything points to the fact that Spain is well positioned and has a powerful structure to develop this industry successfully (Horowitz *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, the Spanish healthcare system, whether public or private, has satisfied the expectations of health tourists in terms of availability of treatment, perceived quality, and financing through health insurance (Fetscherin and Stephano, 2016).

Spain's success in health tourism is due in part to its vast offer in health and wellness services, together with the experience and tradition in the tourism sector, which makes health tourism essential for the Spanish economy. The most popular treatments performed by international health tourists in Spain are cosmetic surgery, orthopaedics, geriatrics, fertility treatments, dentistry, laser refractive eye surgery (LASIK) and bariatric weight loss surgery.

While the largest health tourism outbound markets in Spain are the United Kingdom, followed by Germany and France, driven by their geographical proximity, air connectivity, freedom of movement within the Schengen area and the European Health Insurance Card (Lizarralde, 2013).

6. DISCUSIÓN

Health tourism is an important typology of the tourism industry, which can generate significant revenues worldwide, offering opportunities for economic development and a source of employment opportunities.

Many health tourists are concerned about the quality of care they receive in medical centres, clinics and hospitals outside their home country, due to complications that may

arise during the procedure or once the patient has returned to his home country. There is a fear among many health tourists that -in case of complications arising from the care received- upon returning to their country of origin the doctors will not treat them, or they will be forced to return to the visited country where they received the treatment.

The idea that medical services could be purchased from the cheapest provider anywhere in the world could reduce the pressure on governments to provide adequate healthcare to their citizens (Gupta, 2004). The health treatments offered as part of health tourism can not be afforded by the entire population, so they are reduced mainly to tourists from countries where healthcare costs are high. This could lead to increased pressure on health services in countries receiving health tourists, which could have a negative impact on access, quality of healthcare and waiting times for the local population. In addition, there is a growing concern that medical tourism is causing an internal brain drain, with healthcare professionals leaving the public healthcare system to work in hospitals that treat medical tourists, attracted by higher salaries and better job opportunities (Chinaiand Goswami, 2007).

Despite the problems and undesired effects that health tourism can cause, this tourism segment represents a considerable economic opportunity, since it is a sector with great potential that allows tourists to take advantage of their trip to improve their health and wellbeing (Tapia *et al.*, 2022).

7. CONCLUSIONS

Health tourism is a growing tourism typology – including wellness tourism and medical tourism- that generates significant revenues and profits, as well as business opportunities. International organizations and national and regional governments should establish measures and criteria to reduce the negative effects caused by health tourism and ensure the quality of care received in the various health care centres, clinics, and hospitals around the world.