

DENTAL TOURISM - OUR PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: A lot of European countries are developing dental tourism as a one of the most important segment of the growing medical tourism on our continent. In our country, it must be noted that mainly private clinics, dental offices and practices are involved in dental tourism. Main advantage in dental tourism must be based on the quality of dental services, affordable prices and attractiveness of the destination. In our country big number of places that can attract tourists throughout whole year. The main aim of this article is to explore the factors of the success of dental tourism development in neighboring European countries, services that are offered, equipment, limitations and possibilities for development that will increase the competitiveness of the Macedonian dental tourism industry. Dental tourism, as a part of medical tourism, is also expanding nowadays. Even, dental tourism is a rapidly developing industry in many parts of the world, academic and scientific research on it is very limited. The results of this research show five key factors influencing the decision: Quality-Price, Facilities and Technology, Length of Time and Price of Treatments. The main reasons for abroad dental treatment seeking are lack of availability for adequate dental treatment at home, dissatisfaction with dental treatments at their home countries, lower prices, and high quality care together with patients' wish for vacation. In most of the highly developed countries dental care is too expensive. As a consequence, countries with a lower cost of living and less expensive overheads become attractive destinations for cheaper dental treatment. Dental patients may combine their cheaper dental treatment with a holiday, thanks also to the increasing availability of low-cost air travel. When combined with a holiday, as the name implies, dental tourism can be an opportunity to receive low-cost, quality dental care. Dental tourism is expected to continue growing, as consumers continue to seek out lower-cost options. Dental tourists mostly come from the developed countries of the western world. Patients from Western Europe mostly choose to travel to Hungary, which is a leader in this part of the world. On the American continent leaders in dental tourism are Mexico and Costa Rica, while in Asia it is a leading medical-tourism force India, which is superior in the world, followed by Thailand. In these countries can be included also Poland, Turkey, Romania, Croatia and others. For improving dental tourism it is necessary to improve knowledge of advertising and marketing orientation in general. Also, it is necessary to work on improving the on-line presence and on-line communication with patients (which includes clinical effects from therapy, X-rays, offers, estimates, additional information by email), which is crucial for the success of this form of services. It is necessary to network dentist offices so that they could appear in the market as a cluster and offer a wide range of service packages, with prosthetics seen as a particularly good opportunity. Also, it is necessary to work on networking accommodation and tourist capacities and on developing the overall offer. The prices of dental interventions in Macedonia are 5-10 times lower than the prices in the USA, Canada, Australia, Western Europe, despite the fact that in most dental offices and clinics in our country, the same high quality dental materials and the latest state-of-the-art equipment are used, and also a highly professional staff is working on it. Most often, patients from foreign countries are interested in the placement of dental implants, bridges, crowns and prostheses, which provide complete reconstruction of the tooth.

Keyword: dental tourism, benefits, advantages, medical tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

A lot of European countries are developing dental tourism as a one of the most important segment of the growing medical tourism on our continent. In our country, it must be noted that mainly private clinics, dental offices and practices are involved in dental tourism.

Main advantage in dental tourism must be based on the quality of dental services, affordable prices and attractiveness of the destination. In our country big number of places that can attract tourists throughout whole year.

The main aim of this article is to explore the factors of the success of dental tourism development in neighboring European countries, services that are offered, equipment, limitations and possibilities for development that will increase the competitiveness of the Macedonian dental tourism industry.

2. DENTAL TOURISM - OUR PERSPECTIVES

Dental tourism, as a part of medical tourism, is also expanding nowadays. Even, dental tourism is a rapidly developing industry in many parts of the world, academic research on it is very limited.

According to the definition of the World Tourism Organization, UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), tourism means activities related to travel and stay of people outside their usual environment, but no longer than 1 year, for leisure or recreation, health, studies, sports, religion, family, public missions or gatherings, in which the tourist only spends money, but no earns or receives no compensation.(Buneta, 2016)

In most of the highly developed countries dental care is too expensive. As a consequence, countries with a lower cost of living and less expensive overheads become attractive destinations for cheaper dental treatment. Dental patients may combine their cheaper dental treatment with a holiday, thanks also to the increasing availability of low-cost air travel. When combined with a holiday, as the name implies, dental tourism can be an opportunity to receive low-cost, quality dental care. Dental tourism is expected to continue growing, as consumers continue to seek out lower-cost options. Health tourism according to Ivandić et al.,(2016) is a product that accounts for above-average annual growth rates at this moment, and trends in aging of the populations and orientation to healthy lifestyle nowadays can indicate that this type of tourism has the biggest potential to become the leading motive for travel in the future.

Medical tourism requires a multidisciplinary approach. Also, it relies upon a developed infrastructure. It is also necessary to develop the support sector, which in turn implies touristic logistic activities accompanying the service itself. The communication aspect is very important - from the very first contact with the patient until the patient transport to the destination and organisation of his stay in the country.

The World Health Organization (WHO) does not have a precise definition of medical tourism, due to the different research methods applied in different countries. The WHO considers medical tourists to be people who travel across borders for some medical treatment. Dental and aesthetic treatments are most often requested along with elective surgery and sterility treatment.

Dental tourism, according to American Dental Association (ADA), is defined as activities of traveling to a foreign country in order to obtain a dental treatment. It is considered a subset of medical tourism and implies travel abroad for the purpose of obtaining dental services, which are more expensive in the home country.

Dental tourists mostly come from the developed countries of the western world. Patients from Western Europe mostly choose to travel to Hungary, which is a leader in this part of the world. On the American continent leaders in dental tourism are Mexico and Costa Rica, while in Asia it is a leading medical-tourism force India, which is superior in the world, followed by Thailand. In these countries can be included also Poland, Turkey, Romania, Croatia and others.

Dental tourism is different from medical tourism in terms of requirements and patient needs. Dental treatments are less urgent in comparison with other medical procedures. Unpredictable and urgent situations (unless they are treated on time), unlike those in medical, are not so prominent in dental tourism. In addition, most patients experienced at least once in a lifetime similar experience with pain and dental treatment. Some of them, use preventive therapy and are familiar with the treatment duration.

It must be noted that dental tourism is not always a matter of choice, but it can be also forced circumstance and patients have no choice but to receive dental care at home or abroad. Not being able to afford dental treatment in their own country, they can only to choose between not treating teeth or treatment across the border. For example, disadvantage of health care insurance system is a key factor for low-income Americans to be treated at Mexican border clinics.

Cuamea Velazquez et al. (2017) investigated the reasons for the tourists in a border region choose the clinics of a foreign country for their dental treatments. The results of this research show five key factors influencing the decision: (1) Quality-Price ratio, (2) Facilities and (3)Technology, (4) Length of Time and (5) Price of treatments.

The main reasons for abroad dental treatment seeking are lack of availability for adequate dental treatment at home, dissatisfaction with dental treatments at their home countries, lower prices, high quality care together with patients' wish for vacation. In their paper, Jaapar et al. (2017) discovered that dental care quality and information access, and also cost-savings are the most important motivation factors among dental tourists.

According to one survey done in selected dental clinics located in Zagreb (Kesar & Mikulić, 2017), the two most important factors influencing dental tourist satisfaction are the quality of dental care services and staff professionalism and competence, while the cost of the dental services and honoring the appointment schedule just have a relatively smaller influence on patients' overall experience related to the dental care service providers. Most of the patients from this survey were from Italy, 44.0%, United Kingdom, 48.2 % and Slovenia, 7.9 %.

In this section, about the Balkan countries, we will present one more data originating from Croatia. Namely, Jurišić & Cegur Radović (2017) noted that foreign patients mostly visit dental clinics in Primorje– Gorski Kotar County in Croatia, a region with long tradition in health tourism, due to an excellent price-quality ratio and due to cheaper

dental service when compared to their domicile country. Most of the patients originates from Italy (89%) and the significantly lower number of patients (11%) come from Slovenia. According to these authors, the extent to which marketing activities affect the decision of patients on the use of dental service clinics mostly in more than two-third of the cases.

Besides the benefits of the medical tourism, there are also some risks such as:

- lack of follow-up care by the surgeon if complications occur after returning home,
- little or no legal recourse in cases of negligence
- risk of poor treatment by underqualified practitioners or in substandard facilities

(Buccilli & Stefanacci, 2008).

Croatia and Serbia, have a comparatively well-developed network of dental services offered to international patients, potential tourists, through various forms of communication. In most cases main source of information are web presentations, advertising on TV channels or in print media. The basic pre-requisite for dental tourism is the existence of a website with multilingual (not only in English) contents. These websites offer the full review of offered services with prices in the currency available to a potential patient (US dollar, British pound, or Euro). (Tihi & Peštek, 2009)

The website also frequently includes the comparison of dental service prices with those in other countries. Besides the information on health care services, many offices also offer the possibility of accommodation, transportation, travel organisation, tourist routes, etc. Therefore, technology is an important factor for planning and online booking as well as transport capacity (Sriyono, 2008).

Adams et al. (2018) examine the perspectives and experiences in dental tourism in northern Mexico. According to the authors this particular location enables international patients to access high quality dental care with more affordable prices than typically available in their home countries. Our country occupies the central place in the Balkans and thus meets one of the most important criteria - excellent location. Also we have one of the lowest prices for dental treatments.

In neighboring Bulgaria, a Health Tourism Cluster has been established. The reason why clusters are established is in order to increase the competitiveness of the domestic and foreign touristic market. It is an organized connectivity of companies, suppliers, and government and non-governmental institutions and scientific-educational institutions. They should cooperate according to the "triple helix" model, which is based on the relationship of the public, private and scientific research sector.

After analysis of dental treatments that are offered it can be noted that almost every dental office offers the standard dental cleaning, gingivitis treatment, sealants and definitive filling. Also the most frequent dental procedures are: apicoectomy, dental bondings, dental bridges, dental caps, dental fillings, dental implants, porcelain tooth crowns, root canal, teeth whitening, tooth contouring and tooth veneers.

In context of service prices, it is fact that our country has one of the countries with low prices of dental procedures. The price of one porcelain crown is among the lowest in the region, and also the prices for dental implants are very competitive even compared with neighboring countries.

It can be noted that there is a great potential for dental tourism development, dominantly because the quality of services provided by the offices and their prices are competitive. It is necessary to focus on countries from closer surroundings, and on those where most Macedonia citizens live (Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, Italy, USA).

For improving dental tourism it is necessary to improve knowledge of advertising and marketing orientation in general. Also, it is necessary to work on improving the on-line presence and on-line communication with patients (which includes clinical effects from therapy, X-rays, offers, estimates, additional information by email), which is crucial for the success of this form of services.

It is necessary to network dentist offices so that they could appear in the market as a cluster and offer a wide range of service packages, with prosthetics seen as a particularly good opportunity. Also, it is necessary to work on networking accommodation and tourist capacities and on developing the overall offer.

The prices of dental interventions in Macedonia are 5-10 times lower than the prices in the USA, Canada, Australia, Western Europe, despite the fact that in most dental offices and clinics in our country, the same high quality dental materials and the latest state-of-the-art equipment are used, and also a highly professional staff is working on it.

Most often, patients from foreign countries are interested in the placement of dental implants, bridges, crowns and prostheses, which provide complete reconstruction of the tooth.

3. CONCLUSION

Our country with its extremely favorable geographical position, low prices for dental services and of course the wealth of tourist resorts is an ideal place for development of dental tourism. However, the lack of adequate

marketing and presentation of the opportunities we offer as a country in terms of tourist sites and the possibility of obtaining quality dental services are the reason for insufficient development of this new trend in tourism.

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