



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Medical tourism

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Abstract

Medical tourism refers to the movement of patients to countries outside their country of residence for medical reasons and access to high-quality services at lower costs. The causes of this phenomenon include economic differences in services between countries, shorter waiting times, and the modern technology that characterizes the healthcare systems of these countries.

Aim: The aim of this thesis is to focus on the theoretical approach to the phenomenon of medical tourism, examining holistically its key aspects, advantages, disadvantages, its major dimensions in the global market, the countries promoting it, and the relevant legislation, without concentrating exclusively on specific details

The benefits of medical tourism include advantages for the provider countries, such as boosting the economy and creating new job opportunities, as well as additional benefits for patients who benefit from affordable prices and higher-quality medical services. However, there are also disadvantages, such as the significant pressures on healthcare systems, the high expenses needed for the smooth operation of the sector, and the varying legislation that applies in the countries offering it. Some of the key countries involved in medical tourism are India, Thailand, Canada, Germany, and Turkey. The competition between countries concerns the prices and quality of services they offer, with the goal of attracting more patients.

Method and materials: The methodology followed for the development of this thesis is a literature review of scientific journals, textbooks, books, and the internet, with the aim of providing the most accurate depiction of the phenomenon of medical tourism based on real-world data.

Keywords: Medical Tourism; International Tourists; Healthcare Services; Affordable Prices; Waiting Time; Certification; Intermediaries; Surgical Interventions; Pandemic.

1. Introduction

In recent years, medical tourism has emerged as a rapidly growing global phenomenon, with an increasing number of patients traveling abroad in search of healthcare services. This trend involves individuals leaving their country of residence to receive medical treatment in foreign countries, primarily motivated by the prospect of accessing high-quality care at significantly lower costs. Economic disparities between nations play a key role in this movement, as many developed countries face rising healthcare expenses, while other nations offer affordable medical procedures without compromising on quality.

Another important factor contributing to the rise of medical tourism is the long waiting times for medical treatments in some healthcare systems. Patients often seek faster access to surgeries or specialized procedures, which can be

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scheduled more promptly in other countries. Furthermore, advancements in medical technology and the modernization of healthcare infrastructure in many popular medical tourism destinations have enhanced the reliability and appeal of these services.

Countries such as Thailand, India, Turkey, and Mexico have become major hubs for medical tourism due to their combination of skilled professionals, accredited hospitals, and competitive pricing. As the global demand for efficient and cost-effective healthcare continues to rise, medical tourism is likely to play an increasingly significant role in the international health landscape.

2. Results and findings

In the 19th century, the concept of tourism emerged, which was closely linked to the simultaneous development of mass transportation. People, tired of their daily routines, began to seek ways to rest and relax. The term "tourist" was first used in England in 1800 to refer to wealthy Britons who, for leisure purposes, embarked on the Grand Tour of France. In 1845, British businessman Thomas Cook became the first travel agent by founding the Thomas Cook & Son agency in Harborough. On July 5, 1841, the first organized trip in modern history took place by train. 570 people traveled from Leicester to Loughborough, England, to attend an anti-alcoholism conference. This journey marks 1841 as the official birth year of tourism according to the World Tourism Organization. Cook's actions laid the foundation for the development of the modern tourism industry, as, after this first initiative, he organized many international trips with characteristics similar to those of contemporary tourism, which began to expand after the end of World War II.

But what exactly is tourism? The answer has been difficult to provide, as it is a complex phenomenon. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) defines tourism as the largest economic industry and a development factor for all tourist countries. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism is the sum of the activities of individuals who move and stay in places outside their usual place of residence for a period of less than one year for recreational purposes and generally non-professional reasons.

The phenomenon of tourism is a developing economic, social, and cultural industry with many benefits. The economies of tourist countries grow, with the influx of foreign currency and the development of trade. Governments invest in infrastructure projects aimed at creating and improving roads, airports, ports, hotel facilities, etc., to facilitate the stay of tourists, while at the same time, the benefits of the development of tourist areas are enjoyed by local citizens, such as well-maintained and accessible beaches, beautification of squares, etc. New employment opportunities emerge, combating urbanization to a significant degree and contributing to the improvement of the country's standard of living. With the "invasion" of tourists and consequently the interaction of different nationalities, the understanding of peoples is achieved, as well as the exchange of cultural elements, which helps to maintain and improve global peace. Through the temporary interaction of tourists and local residents, respect, mutual appreciation, and often admiration are developed. Tourist countries have the opportunity to showcase their customs, traditions, and history through various activities and events organized by local authorities throughout the year, with an emphasis on tourist seasons. Tourism offers rest, rejuvenation, and mental peace to people. At the same time, it serves as a means of promoting a country and advertising its culture.

When studying the phenomenon of tourism, one must also consider the other side of the coin, namely its negative aspects. The intellectual and cultural development of a country takes a backseat. The distortion of the language and the falsification of lifestyle and traditions pose significant risks, as the natives of a country adopt linguistic elements and behaviors of incoming foreigners. The commercialization of culture promotes the underground economy and makes countries heavily dependent on foreigners economically, thus undervaluing the capabilities of the locals, who become complacent with profiteering at the expense of tourists. Another negative consequence is the neglect of other potential economic sectors, such as agriculture, livestock, and fishing. Local governments invest in infrastructure projects that will make tourist centers attractive, and as a result, other sectors are marginalized. The alteration of the natural environment, through land encroachment for the construction of hotel units, pollution of seas and forested areas, and an increase in crime and violence, distorts the profile of a nation. Moreover, overtourism has a negative impact on the search for housing by locals due to the tourist exploitation of real estate by property owners, thus raising rental costs.

Tourism plays a significant role in the creation of Gross National Product (GNP) in most countries. The volume of incoming foreign currency is proportional to the tourist traffic of the countries. According to the WTTC, tourism is responsible for 25% of new jobs and contributes to 10% of revenues over the last five years. As a global export sector, tourism ranks third after fuels and chemicals, but ahead of food and car parts. As Bloomberg reports, in about a decade, tourism in all its forms will become a \$16 trillion industry, making up 11.4% of global GDP. The following image from the "Our World in Data" organization shows the percentage of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) that comes from tourism

in 2022, according to the UNWTO. The coloring of countries is based on the percentage contribution of tourism to GDP, ranging from 1% to 6%. Countries that are not colored indicate a lack of published statistical data for that period or deficiencies in measurements. Countries with a 1% contribution represent those where tourism has a minimal impact on GDP, meaning the economy is supported by other sectors. As the percentages increase, we see countries where the economy relies more and more on tourism.

The "industry" of tourism, as a multidimensional phenomenon, unfolds at many levels and is categorized into various types depending on the characteristics of each case. People do not travel solely for rest and leisure. They may travel to visit a friend or relative. In other cases, the trip may be for attending a sporting event, participating in a conference, fulfilling religious duties, or for health reasons. Additionally, there are trips made for educational purposes, participation in art festivals or musical and theatrical events, trips for gambling, or even trips without a specific destination or purpose, just for the joy and satisfaction that the journey itself offers. The different purposes of travel lead to the classification of tourism into the following types:

- Mass Tourism
- Individual Tourism
- Domestic Tourism
- International Tourism
- Seasonal Tourism
- Conference–Exhibition Tourism
- Urban Tourism
- Marine–Coastal Tourism
- Static–Moving Tourism
- Youth– Senior Tourism
- Medical Tourism
- Ecotourism– Environmental Tourism
- Cultural– Cosmopolitan Tourism
- Social Tourism
- Religious Tourism
- Educational Tourism
- Therapeutic Tourism
- Sports Tourism
- Agrotourism– Geotourism
- Archaeological Tourism
- Incentive Tourism
- Adventure Tourism
- City Tourism
- Family Tourism

Medical tourism is often mistakenly considered a modern phenomenon. In reality, it has its roots in antiquity. From the moment people understood the value of health and how it is the ultimate good, they made efforts to travel to places that offered ways to improve their health.

As early as 4000 B.C., the Sumerians, believing in the benefits of natural hot springs, established settlements around them. During the Bronze Age (2000 B.C.), the mountain people of Switzerland observed that water from mineral springs rich in iron had therapeutic properties. During the Roman Empire, many baths and hot springs (thermae) were built and became popular destinations for aristocrats and nobility. In Greece, the historian Herodotus made the first references to this method of health maintenance and the healing properties of hot spring waters. Following him, Hippocrates (460-376 B.C.) studied medical science and the benefits of hydrotherapy. The Asclepieia emerged in various regions, becoming centers of attraction for patients who traveled from all over to receive treatment from healers and the therapeutic springs.

During the Middle Ages, in Japan, the mineral springs known as "Onsen" became famous for their healing properties and attracted Samurai warriors, who would immerse themselves in the waters after battle to speed up the healing of their wounds.

In 1284 A.D., the "Monsouri" hospital was built in Cairo, Egypt, which became the largest therapeutic facility of its time, with a capacity of 8,000 patients. Wealthy individuals from various parts of the world crossed borders to receive medical care at Monsouri.

During the Renaissance, medical tourism began to develop in Europe. In the 14th century, Tsar Peter the Great and Victor Hugo visited mineral springs in the village of "Ville d'Eaux." In the 16th century, wealthy Europeans traveled to cities with therapeutic springs, such as Bath in England, which received royal patronage and became world-renowned. In the 18th and 19th centuries, an increasing number of Europeans, and eventually Americans, traveled to tourist destinations with therapeutic springs, seeking treatment for diseases such as tuberculosis.

In 1973, the International Union of Tourist Organizations (IUTO) first used the term "medical tourism," referring to the total number of tourists seeking medical services in foreign countries.

At the beginning of the 21st century, medical tourism began to develop rapidly, with the number of tourists steadily increasing. Asia became a popular destination due to the low cost of services. The Joint Commission International (JCI), established in 1997, provides a sense of security to tourists through its checks on medical infrastructure. As a result, Thailand and Singapore have become recognized medical tourism destinations, offering high-quality healthcare services at relatively low costs. In addition to Asia, we now see a rapid expansion of medical tourism in the United States and Europe, with the latter evolving into global healthcare hubs.

Medical tourism and health tourism are two distinct concepts that are often confused, but they have different meanings and objectives. According to Law 4582/2018 (Government Gazette 208/A/11-12-2018), health tourism includes medical tourism, wellness tourism, and thermal/mud therapy tourism. All three of these types of tourism aim to restore health, whether for prevention, treatment, or recovery.

As with general tourism, it is also challenging to define medical tourism precisely. However, various definitions in the literature describe the movement of people with health issues or chronic conditions to other countries to receive high-quality medical services from approved and legitimate medical establishments, with the goal of prevention, treatment, and improving physical and mental health.

The OECD defines medical tourism as the activities of travelers-patients involving moving outside their country of residence to receive medical services such as surgeries, dental and ophthalmological procedures, fertility treatments, etc.

According to the Ministry of Tourism, medical tourism includes the movement of people within or outside borders for medical supervision and care, aimed at the prevention, diagnosis, and maintenance of their personal health. Patients are often accompanied by relatives or friends, who stay nearby during the treatment. Medical tourism includes, beyond medical care, services such as transportation, sightseeing, dining, and accommodation in hotels.

Medical tourism can also be seen as cross-border healthcare, as it takes place outside the patient's home country. Patients-tourists, along with their companions, combine medical care with leisure activities, relaxation, and sightseeing at the destination they choose. It is essentially the "combination" of medical treatment with leisure tourism. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, medical tourism is a multifaceted and constantly growing phenomenon. In the 21st century, in the year 2025, there is no room for stagnant services, which quickly fail and fade away.

There are many reasons for the growth of medical tourism. The most significant, we could say, are economic. Globalization in all its aspects is one of them. The strengthening of international trade and global markets leads countries to open up to new economic sectors, among which medical tourism services belong. The improvement of healthcare services in developing countries and their increasing costs, the liberalization of trade in the healthcare sector, the crisis in social insurance systems, and the growing penetration of private insurance coverage all contribute to the globalization of healthcare. Health is a valuable asset, but it is now also considered a tradable commodity promoted through advertising campaigns. Countries that trade health products compete with each other by continuously improving and enhancing the high-quality health services they offer at competitive prices. The global spread of technology and its penetration into medicine also contributes to the growth and spread of medical tourism. Technology plays a crucial role in medical science and has brought revolutionary changes to healthcare systems worldwide. Telemedicine, robotic systems in surgical procedures, and healthcare management, neurotechnology, bioprinting, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning are valuable tools for countries and destinations in medical tourism, attracting patient-tourists seeking advanced medical interventions. The spread of technology also contributed to the modernization of mass transportation systems, making the movement of patient-tourists faster and more comfortable,

which facilitates the search for treatment outside their home country. The economic burden on healthcare systems in most countries, combined with the weaknesses in social insurance systems, pushes individuals to seek ways to cover the increasing cost of medical services, which heavily impacts the consumers of healthcare. All of this, along with long waiting lists, leads more and more patients to seek treatment abroad. The aging population, coupled with the increasing life expectancy, leads to a higher demand for healthcare services. However, the stagnant wage profile of service users, along with their changing health profiles, is an important factor in the development of medical tourism. In conclusion, we could say that in a society that is constantly undergoing changes, which continuously shape its form and needs, the phenomenon of medical tourism will continue to grow as long as technology and the global economy continue to thrive.

According to the literature, medical tourism encompasses a wide range of healthcare services provided by specialized medical and nursing institutions. The most common services include:

- **Diagnostic Tests**
 - Preventive screenings
 - Specialized blood tests
 - Ultrasounds, CT scans
- **General Surgery**
 - Cardiac surgery
 - Cardiological interventions
 - Organ transplants
 - Neurosurgical procedures
 - Dentistry
 - Plastic and aesthetic surgery
 - Ophthalmology (laser treatments, cataract surgery)
 - Urological procedures
 - Stem cell therapies
- **Rehabilitation Centers** (e.g., post-surgical recovery or after a stroke/traumatic brain injury)
- **Chronic Disease Care Centers** (e.g., asthma, diabetes)
- **Elderly Care Centers**
- **Nephrology Units for Chronic Renal Failure and Dialysis**
- **Specialized Centers for People with Disabilities**
- **Dermatology**
- **In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)**
- **Oncological Services**
- **Obesity Treatment**
- **Insurance Services** (medical and accommodation)
- **Tourism Services**
- **Alternative Therapies**
 - Wellness Spa
 - Oriental and Asian Medicine

Medical facilitators are a modern specialization that pertains to businesses or organizations which act as the connecting link between patients and service providers. These facilitators represent the first point of contact for patients with medical tourism, and as such, can also be considered as a means of advertising it. Medical Tourism Facilitators (MTFs) create personalized travel packages with high-quality services at competitive prices.

These professionals in medical tourism have multiple roles and set objectives for their success. Some of the roles and goals they aim for are as follows:

- As already mentioned, they connect patients with healthcare and tourism service providers.
- They develop appropriate strategic and business plans.
- They recommend the best destination country based on the patient's needs and take care of travel documents, transportation to the destination, as well as return travel, accommodation, and sightseeing.
- They maintain partnerships with healthcare facilities and hotels in the destination countries.
- They ensure that the facilities meet international safety standards.
- They are well-versed in the legislation of both the destination and the home country of international tourists.
- They ensure the safety of travelers.

- They maintain a consultative role and handle any issues that arise during the journey.
- They are proficient in medical terminology.
- They support patients during and after the treatment, as well as for a period after the patient returns to their home country.
- They offer legal coverage in case of medical malpractice.

In conclusion, medical facilitators are a complex and promising profession. In fact, in recent years, organizations such as Medical Tourism Facilitators have appeared in thousands. Below are some of the most well-known organizations in the field:

- Companion Global Health Care – Partners with accredited hospitals in Asia, Latin America, Europe, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield of South Carolina.
- European Medical Tourism – Promotes Germany as the top medical tourism destination.
- IndUSHealth – Highlights India as the preferred medical tourism destination.
- Med Journeys – Offers global medical tourism services.
- Medical Tourism Corporation – A global medical tourism platform operating in Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Croatia, Turkey, and Vietnam.
- Philippine Medical Tourism – Based in Makati city, Philippines.
- American Medical Care – Offers global services to clients from America, Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and South America.
- Surgeon and Safari – Based in Johannesburg, offers recovery accommodations with an in-house lodge and provides safaris after patient recovery.

There are several certification organizations involved in medical tourism. Some of the prominent ones are:

- JCI (Joint Commission International)

The International Healthcare Accreditation Organization of the USA is a private, non-profit organization, founded in 1997 as a branch of Joint Commission Resources, Inc. The process followed by JCI is lengthy and costly for healthcare facilities, with fees potentially reaching \$46,000 in the US. The organization is one of the most reliable, and the "Gold Seal" it provides offers the most credible certification worldwide.

- Accreditation Canada International

The International Healthcare Accreditation System of Canada began its operations in 2010. The Qmentum International is the certification system for healthcare and nursing organizations. The organization works alongside the Health Standards Organization (HSO), which develops global standards for excellent quality based on evidence and evaluation programs. Accreditation Canada International consists of a team of over 1,000 people and provides certification for health units in Canada and globally, typically within 1 to 1.5 years.

- Temos GmbH

Temos International Healthcare Accreditation is a German organization founded in 2010 by Dr. Claudia Mika. Since 2011, the organization has expanded its activities to Greece and Cyprus, establishing Temos Aegean, and works in the Mediterranean and Turkey in cooperation with Marmassistance. In fact, Turkey's Ministry of Finance chose Temos, among five international certification systems, as the only specialized system for managing international patients and medical tourism services. Along with improving medical care quality, Temos also aims to optimize non-clinical services offered by countries.

- QHA-Trent Accreditation

QHA-Trent is a private British healthcare company focused on improving service quality and reducing risks to patients. The company is independent of the National Health Service (NHS) and was the first to provide certification to an Asian healthcare provider. In 2013, its standards were certified by ISQua. The company followed a similar certification process as other organizations and offered certification for a period of 2 to 3 years. According to its official website, the company has ceased operations.

- CHKS

This organization began its operations in 1989, developing comparative hospital assessments in the United Kingdom. It is accredited by the UK Accreditation Service (UKAS) under ISO 17021:2011 and by the global ISQua External Evaluation Association (IEEA). It provides ISO 9001:2015 certification to its clients.

- DNV Healthcare

DNV (Det Norsk Veritas) was founded in 1864 in Oslo, Norway, and is headquartered there. In 1867, Germanischer Lloyd (GL) was established in Hamburg, Germany, by 600 shipowners, shipbuilders, and insurers, and in 2013, it merged with DNV. The company then rebranded as DNVGL. On March 1, 2021, it returned to its original name, DNV, and established offices worldwide. DNV's accreditation for hospitals, primary care providers, and specialized outpatient clinics is based on evaluation methods such as staff and patient interviews, supervision and inspection of facilities, and medical record reviews. Its NIAHO® standards are approved by the CMS, which certifies US hospitals.

- ACHS (Australian Council on Healthcare Standards)

ACHS is an independent, non-profit healthcare accreditation organization founded in 1974. The organization develops clinical indicators and standards for healthcare services and is authorized by the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care to provide certification to healthcare providers based on a series of programs.

These organizations play a vital role in ensuring that medical tourism providers maintain high standards of care, safety, and quality, which is crucial for the success and growth of the industry globally.

The term "medical tourist" refers to patients who, for various reasons, decide to seek medical services outside the borders of their permanent residence. The majority of medical tourists are individuals with financial means, usually from developed countries, seeking high-standard services. The profile of these patients is not clear-cut, as there are many reasons that drive them to pursue medical tourism, and their needs vary. Often, their needs and motivations overlap.

In addition to seeking healthcare services, medical tourists also look for tourist services that meet their expectations and preferences. Criteria for their selection include economic and quality accommodation for them and their companions, flight options, the availability of tour guides and interpreters, the climate, and the cultural elements of the destination country.

Categories of Medical Tourists

Medical tourists can be categorized based on their needs and reasons for choosing medical tourism:

- Individuals seeking treatment for temporary health issues: These are patients requiring surgical procedures or treatment for temporary health conditions. The reasons for seeking treatment abroad may be financial, the need for faster surgical intervention due to long waiting times in their home country, or greater trust in the doctors in the chosen country. The primary goal of these trips is the recovery of the patient's health.
- Individuals dealing with chronic health problems or special conditions: This group includes patients with chronic illnesses such as neurological, hematological, or cardiovascular disorders, patients with chronic kidney failure, cancer patients, diabetics, organ transplant patients or those awaiting a transplant, individuals with disabilities or special needs, and those with addiction issues or mental health conditions. These patients, due to their difficulties, may not be able to engage in regular tourism and therefore choose medical tourism, which offers them opportunities for relaxation alongside healthcare support.
- Individuals wish to combine preventive healthcare with vacations: These tourists are mainly interested in relaxation, coupled with health maintenance. This category typically includes individuals with considerable financial means.
- Individuals traveling during recovery from an illness or surgery: These are individuals who are recovering from illness or surgery and choose to visit rehabilitation centers abroad to continue their recovery process.
- Individuals choose destinations with therapeutic resources like hot springs, baths, or spa centers: These medical tourists seek destinations that offer natural healing resources like mineral springs, wellness spas, or therapeutic baths, with the goal of improving their well-being.

- Elderly individuals: This group seeks affordable vacations that also meet their increased healthcare needs due to age. These individuals often combine relaxation with healthcare services.
- Individuals travel for economic reasons: Some individuals travel abroad purely for economic reasons to receive medical treatment for conditions that are more expensive in their home country.
- Individuals seeking medical interventions not available in their home country: This group includes patients who require medical procedures that are unavailable in their country, either due to legal restrictions or the lack of medical technology.

According to researcher Thomas Lautier, medical tourists can also be categorized into four groups based on their geographical origin:

- American patients: A significant group of medical tourists comes from the United States, as healthcare services in the U.S. are expensive, and waiting times for certain treatments can be long.
- Middle Eastern patients: Middle Eastern countries contribute a significant number of medical tourists, with many individuals seeking better quality or more affordable healthcare services abroad.
- British patients: British patients are another significant group, as the NHS (National Health Service) faces challenges in managing healthcare demand, which leads to a need for external medical services.
- Patients from other developing countries: Individuals from less developed countries often seek medical tourism due to a lack of resources or difficulties in accessing adequate healthcare in their home countries.

Medical tourism is rapidly growing, as the combination of healthcare needs and leisure makes it an attractive option for many countries offering high-quality healthcare services.

Medical tourism, as mentioned in a previous chapter, although it has roots in antiquity, was only coined as a concept in 1973. Prior to that, people traveled for medical reasons without any formal organization or complete awareness of what they were looking for or where they could find treatments. The knowledge they had about their medical needs was often passed on through their immediate surroundings. A person would hear about a place with therapeutic and healing properties and share that information with someone else. The reputation of a location for its therapeutic benefits grew by word of mouth. Later on, the name of a doctor with "miraculous hands" would spread among families and friends. Thus, a human chain was created, which formed the first advertising campaign for health tourism. Later, medical centers worldwide became widely known for their innovations through radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. Following that, conferences began referring to healthcare facilities around the world. Over time, as technology expanded into every sector, it became a tool for advertising and promoting medical tourism. The World Wide Web, social media, and modern marketing strategies are considered "treasures" for promoting medical tourism.

Medical travel, in conjunction with the evolving growth of the global population, is increasing rapidly. The flexible pricing of healthcare services, easily accessible travel options, and the availability of comprehensive information via the internet form the foundation for the rapid rise of the global annual turnover in medical tourism. According to a study by the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine conducted in 2012 (e-kyklades.gr), precise measurements of the size of the global market cannot be made. This happens for several reasons:

- **The profile of health tourists is unclear.** Not all patients travel with the same motivations or common goals. They have different expectations from their trips, and these do not follow a common pattern.
- **There is a disparity in the cost of provided services,** particularly in relation to what happens in the U.S., where the pricing can be up to 90% higher than in other countries with emerging economies (e-kyklades.gr).
- **The evolving nature of medical tourism** with the influx of new destinations into the market and the departure of others, as well as the fluctuating pricing of services, makes it difficult to accurately record data.
- **The different legislative frameworks of the countries providing medical tourism** complicate the accurate recording of the phenomenon's details.
- **The lack of precision in recording medical data,** which is not done in detail regarding cases, services, and their prices. The distinction between the medical and tourist aspects of a trip is also a significant challenge in obtaining accurate measurements.

- **The fact that the activity of individuals traveling abroad for medical tourism is unofficial and not fully organized** further complicates accurate data collection.
- **The presence of varying recording standards.** Countries do not have a common denominator for measuring incoming medical tourism cases. Some countries record the prices of specific services, while others record different ones. This is logical, as not all destinations provide the same services. In some countries, data is collected regarding the nationality of patients, their age, their accommodation after the treatment, and even their extended stay in the country. However, these measures do not follow a unified method. For example, in Thailand, hospital admissions are recorded, while in Singapore, data collection is conducted through exit polls at airports.
- **The term "medical tourism" is still vague.** Many confuse it with health tourism, which leads to inaccurate records.

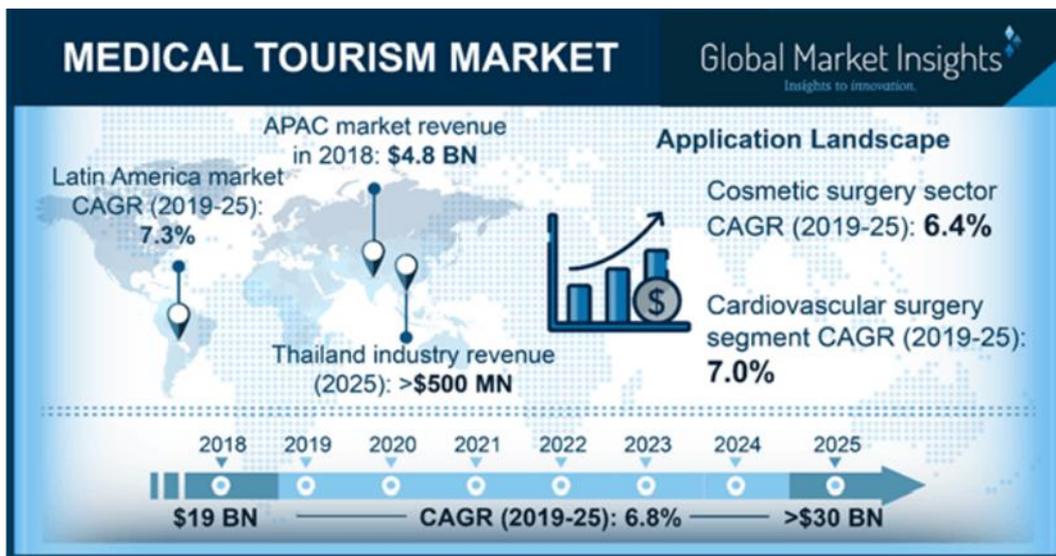


Figure 1 Global Medical Tourism Market Forecast (Source: Global Market Insights Inc.)

The escalation of the pandemic led to the closure of national borders, and as a result, travel was either prohibited or reduced to a minimum. This situation created a global economic crisis, as a significant portion of the economy relies on tourism. Medical travel suffered a severe blow. The funds that were meant to strengthen medical tourism began to be invested in the strategic planning for dealing with the "invisible enemy." Safety for medical tourists has always been a top priority. However, during the pandemic, no country could guarantee this. The primary concern was addressing the virus and protecting domestic patients and the general population. The lack of healthcare security discouraged patients from seeking treatment abroad. As a result, many planned medical trips were postponed. The demand and supply of services decreased, either for safety reasons or economic reasons, as lockdowns led to an economic downturn. Medical tourism companies were unable to offer their services due to a lack of interest from patients and because of the mandatory suspension of their operations as part of the preventive measures taken by governments. After all, during a time of war, as the pandemic was described, who thinks about travel? The world had come to a halt.

According to a DIVE study in 2020, the annual growth rate, which was at 12.4% CAGR, dropped to 8.6%, with a continued forecast of decline until the end of 2021. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported that global GDP decreased by over 22 trillion in 2021, and the economic impact of the pandemic is expected to continue for at least five years after its conclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused many difficulties for society, but it also brought several positive outcomes for the medical field and medical tourism. The need to adapt to the new circumstances opened the way for innovative projects that improved infrastructure. The protective measures taken by governments worldwide, although extreme in many cases, created a sense of security for patients. Technology was utilized in many areas of medicine, as well as in organizing and carrying out medical travel, and plans, actions, and medical interventions that were previously in experimental stages (e.g., telemedicine, teleappointments) were implemented. Hospitals improved their facilities, added more beds to their capacity, and strengthened their staff with new hires. All these improvements would remain even after the end

of the pandemic, opening paths for innovation and safety. Although medical tourism was affected by COVID-19, it seemed to withstand the challenges and relied on these changes to continue its development in the post-pandemic era.

3. Conclusion

Tourism, as a phenomenon, has deep roots that trace back to ancient times when people traveled primarily for survival reasons. Over time, the reasons for travel evolved, and by the 19th century, the modern concept of tourism emerged, linked to the development of transportation methods and the growing need for recreation. Tourism is a complex activity that influences the global economy, society, and culture. The benefits of tourism are numerous—economically, labor-wise, socially, and culturally—it promotes peace among nations and provides mental relaxation. However, tourism also has negative consequences, including the commercialization of culture, the neglect of other economic sectors, environmental degradation, and inflation. Tourism is divided into many categories, depending on the purpose of travel, and it represents a multifaceted phenomenon that affects all aspects of human life. It is an inalienable right of every person, offering mental balance, while at the same time requiring careful management to preserve its benefits and avoid its disadvantages.

The services of medical tourism cover a wide range of medical interventions, while its ecosystem forms a microcosm of services and professionals who coordinate the operation of services and ensure the safety and quality of healthcare.

Despite the challenges it faces, medical tourism continues to grow, offering increasingly better services to the citizens of the world. It is characterized by intense competition among countries seeking international recognition by obtaining certification from international organizations, thus ensuring the quality of the services they provide, patient safety, and compliance with global protocols. International certification organizations such as Temos, JCI, and DNA Healthcare play a significant role in ensuring safety standards. The stamp of approval given by these organizations is the guarantee patients are looking for regarding the services they will receive in the destination country.

However, the certification offered by these organizations does not only pertain to medical services but also to tourism-related services, such as accommodation and accessibility at tourist resorts, for all categories of patients. Regular inspections conducted by certification bodies in medical and hotel facilities, to ensure the adherence to health regulations and the cooperation between them, contribute to the timely detection of potential issues and dysfunctions, as well as their resolution. This, in turn, strengthens patient trust in the service-providing countries, resulting in the medical tourism sector growing under optimal conditions. Medical tourists are individuals who travel abroad to receive medical care combined with tourist experiences. The needs and reasons for medical travel shape the profile of medical tourists. Typically, the term "medical tourist" refers to individuals with economic means who seek specialized, high-quality treatments at a lower cost. They can be classified into categories based on the type of services they seek and the reasons for their needs. Another distinction can be made based on their geographic origin. Consequently, countries offering medical tourism must ensure the quality of their services and provide comprehensive service packages that meet international safety standards, so they can be chosen by medical tourists.

The advertising of the medical tourism sector has evolved significantly over time. The development of technology has helped modern promotional tools to be used, with the ultimate goal of attracting more clients. Traditional advertising media (radio, television) are now being replaced by cutting-edge tools that rely primarily on the internet. Additionally, social media plays a crucial role in advertising, while medical tourism conferences and exhibitions allow professionals in the sector to interact and establish collaborations. Websites have become the primary and most popular modern medium for showcasing medical tourism. Notably, word-of-mouth advertising, which has its roots in antiquity, continues to be one of the most effective means of promoting medical tourism.

In conclusion, the successful promotion of the medical tourism sector relies on a combination of tradition and modern technology, aimed at continuously informing potential clients and attracting the interest of international patients.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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