

ORIGINAL ARTICLE / PRACA ORYGINALNA

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## MEDICAL TOURISM TRENDS IN POLAND

### TRENDY W POLSKIEJ TURYSTYCE MEDYCZNEJ

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#### Summary

The global increase in the flow of patients and health professionals as well as medical technology has led to new patterns of consumption and production of medical services in the past decades. Free movement of goods and services contributed to the liberalization of trade in health services.

Medical tourism is one of the forms of health tourism, rapidly growing on the global market. In medical tourism, patients travel to neighboring or distant countries in order to receive medical assistance under the global trend of combining treatment with leisure.

The development of medical tourism is also observed in Poland. Citizens of Germany, Great Britain and the

Scandinavian countries use the services offered in Polish medical institutions most frequently. One of the main problems in the further development of Polish medical tourism is a lack of implementation of the European Directive on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare.

This article describes the process of medical tourism development in Poland. The phenomenon of medical tourism, types of health tourism and main drivers of that process are also characterized by the authors.

#### Streszczenie

W ostatnich latach, z uwagi na liczne migracje pacjentów, personelu medycznego, a także szybki rozwój technologii medycznych, zauważyć można nowe wzorce zarówno w konsumpcji, jak i świadczeniu usług medycznych. Swobodny przepływ towarów i usług na terenie krajów Unii Europejskiej dodatkowo wpłynął na rozwój usług medycznych świadczonych dla pacjentów zagranicznych.

Turystyka medyczna jest jedną z form turystyki zdrowotnej. Celem turystyki medycznej jest podróżowanie pacjenta do sąsiednich bądź odległych krajów, aby uzyskać pomoc medyczną – najczęściej w ramach globalnego trendu łączenia leczenia z odpoczynkiem.

Rozwój turystyki medycznej jest obserwowany również w Polsce. Z usług polskich podmiotów leczniczych najczęściej korzystają Niemcy, Anglicy oraz mieszkańcy krajów skandynawskich. Jednak jednym z najważniejszych problemów w dalszym rozwoju turystyki medycznej w Polsce jest brak implementacji Dyrektywy Unii Europejskiej w sprawie stosowania praw pacjentów w transgranicznej opiece zdrowotnej.

Artykuł prezentuje proces rozwoju turystyki medycznej w Polsce. Autorzy scharakteryzowali w nim pojęcie turystyki medycznej, rodzaje turystyki zdrowotnej oraz główne czynniki wpływające na globalny rozwój tego obszaru opieki zdrowotnej.

**Key words:** medical tourism, health tourism, trans-border Directive

**Słowa kluczowe:** turystyka medyczna, turystyka zdrowotna, dyrektywa transgraniczna

## INTRODUCTION

Medical tourism is one of the forms of health tourism rapidly growing on the global market. In medical tourism patients travel to neighboring or distant countries in order to receive medical assistance under the global trend of combining treatment with leisure. More and more people choose trips that allow them to rest and use some health and beauty treatments.

The beginnings of the medical tourism development must be sought in ancient times, when traveling was performed not only for religious, commercial or military purposes, but also to improve physical and mental health. However, only in the first decade of the twenty-first century – the development of medical tourism has become more dynamic, mainly because of its promotion in the mass media (television, Internet, magazines) [1].

In the era of easily accessible and efficient world communication, trips to other countries have become more and more common. People wanting to look for savings and the best standard of living successfully use opportunities of medical tourism to take care of health. Therefore, the phenomenon of that sector is very buoyant, and its development will further accelerate in the upcoming years.

## DEFINITION

Health is a value that every man seeks to fulfill. The World Health Organization defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity [2]. Achieving or at least an approximation to this state gives a person more self-confidence, the ability to achieve higher earnings or better contacts with other people. From the point of view of national economics, healthy people are more effective and more productive, which, in the long term, contributes to economic development. Therefore, both people as individuals as well as companies, organizations and entire countries reap different benefits from the phenomenon of medical tourism for themselves.

Medical tourism is a part of the phenomenon referred to as health tourism, which includes:

- health-resort tourism – implemented in health resort places including treatment of chronic diseases, rehabilitation, prevention, education and health promotion,

- spa and wellness tourism - including, among others, beauty treatments, massage, gymnastics [3] as well as the typical wellness products such as methods of combating stress and motivating workshops,
- medical tourism - traveling to other countries to obtain health services combined with relaxation, physical and mental regeneration, sightseeing and entertainment [4]. This term is usually associated with traveling to another country as well as traveling across own country in order to get health services at the highest level [5].

An important issue is a proper identification of the person involved in medical tourism. There are some terms such as client, tourist, consumer, patient, tourist-patient, patient-tourist in literature [6]. However, the term ‘medical tourist’ is regarded as the most accurate, mostly because patient is not traveling alone and largely connects the trip in order to improve the health with the ordinary tourist trip.

The phenomenon of medical tourism can also be considered in terms of economics which distinguishes two types of medical tourism, resulting from:

- quality-orientation – including medical tourists coming from economically underdeveloped countries who seek medical services in other countries at the highest level of quality or better treatment offer, or want to accentuate their socio-professional status,
- expenditures-orientation – including medical tourists coming from economically developed and prosperous countries, seeking the services of similar quality at a lower cost [7].

The World Health Organization distinguishes some factors influencing the development of medical tourism phenomenon: more advanced technology, better quality of care, quicker access to treatment or lower costs associated with it (Fig. 1.).

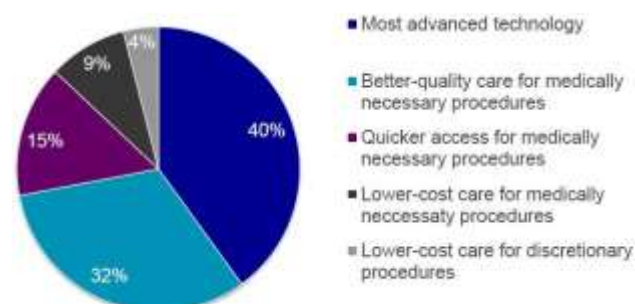


Fig. 1. Main drivers of medical tourism

Source: Kelley E. WHO Patient Safety Program, World Health Organization, October 2013

Along with the continuous development of medical tourism, medical tourists demand for space, additional attractions or facilities. Countries and institutions that are the destinations of medical tourists use more and more marketing tools to create the most attractive offer for existing and potential customers. These entities use all marketing tools characteristic of the tourism industry, but to better adapt to the needs of customers, a new profession in this branch has arisen – medical tourism facilitator [8], which intermediary organizes and supports the movement of medical tourists. Medical tourism facilitator is responsible for contact, support and assistance to tourists at various stages of their tour, starting with a decision about the facility and accommodation choosing for all extra-curricular activities during their stay, to the place of residence and the organization of health care as a control.

In Poland such profession is known as a specialist in the field of medical tourism and it becomes so necessary, that many national universities have opened special studies in this field. These include Warsaw School of Economics with the course of the Health Tourism Manager, Łazarski University with the course of the Medical Tourism or Cracow School of Health Promotion allowing education of Health Tourism specialization within the Tourism and Recreation studies. The establishment of numerous educational opportunities in this direction is a clear response to the rapidly growing demand for services related to medical tourism and its comprehensive services.

#### MEDICAL TOURISM MARKET IN EUROPE AND IN THE WORLD

The global increase in the flow of patients and health professionals as well as medical technology has led to new patterns of consumption and production of medical services in the past decades. Free movement of goods and services contributed to the liberalization of trade in health services.

One of the first countries that recognized the potential of medical tourism and began to use it, attracting thousands of patients, was India. In 2009-2011 the number of medical tourists in India increased by 30% [9]. The next leading countries in the field of medical tourism are Singapore, Thailand, Mexico. European leaders are Turkey, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The main reason for that situation is high quality of service offered in above-mentioned countries. For example, Singapore is recognized as

having the best equipped clinics all over Asia, and lower price than offered in other countries.

Tab. 1. *Medical tourism prices (in USD)*

Procedure	Countries						
	US	India	Thailand	Singapore	Malaysia	Mexico	Poland
Heart Bypass	113000	10000	13000	20000	9000	3250	7140
Heart Valve Replacement	150000	9500	11000	13000	9000	18000	9520
Angioplasty	47000	11000	10000	13000	11000	15000	7300
Hip Replacement	47000	9000	12000	11000	10000	173000	6120
Knee Replacement	48000	8500	10000	13000	8000	14650	6375

Source: Kelley E. WHO Patient Safety Program, World Health Organization, October 2013

The value of the global medical tourism market is estimated at 188 billion USD annually. The Asian countries are leaders in that sector. In 2011 the medical tourism market in Thailand reached 3.1 billion USD, the Malaysian market in the last 10 years made an 8-fold increase reaching a value of 590 million USD, the Indian and the Singapore reached respectively 2.2 and 1.6 billion USD.

In connection with the approval of the European Union Directive on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare (Directive 2011/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2011) patients achieved freedom of choice of health care in the whole European Union. As a result, public and private hospitals in the EU can treat foreigners, and treatment costs are covered by national health funds from their country to the value of the same treatment in the country of patient's origin. Outside the European Union, the country with a large development of medical tourism is Turkey. In 2010-2014 32% growth in the medical tourism market in Turkey was recorded, and the Turkish government goal is to achieve 10 billion USD in 2016 by supporting 1 million patients [10].

#### MEDICAL TOURISM MARKET IN POLAND

The development of medical tourism is also observed in Poland. It is estimated that in 2012, the market reached a value of 800 million PLN thanks to 300 thousand patients from other countries.

Figure 2 points out nations visiting Polish medical centers the most frequently. In 2011, thanks to the possibility of getting health services in whole EU, the value of benefits provided to foreign patients under the European Health Insurance Card in Poland amounted to over 153 million PLN (Fig. 3).

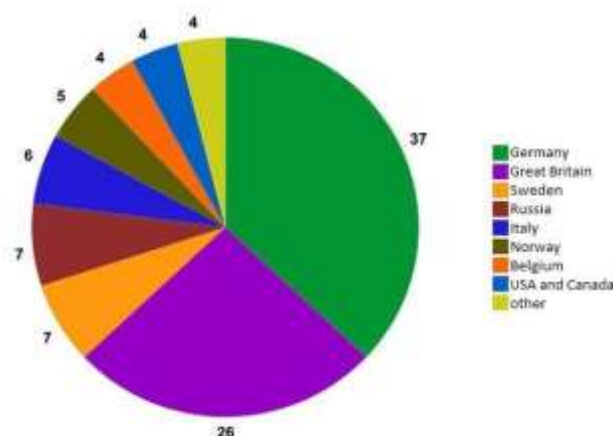


Fig. 2. Medical tourism statistics – most frequent arrivals countries

Source: own work based on Medical tourism in Poland [Internet] [Cited 2014 Oct 14]. Available from: www.tourmedica.pl

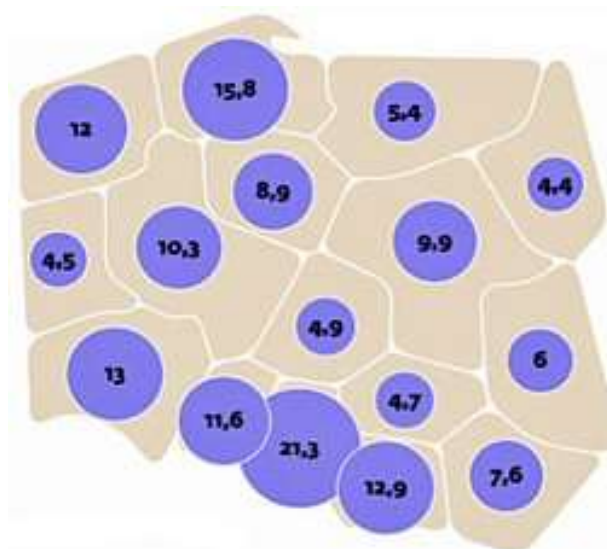


Fig. 3. Value of medical services provided under European Health Insurance Card

Source: Klinger K. The Germans treat in Poland, because it is faster and cheaper [Internet] [cited 2014 Oct 14]. Available from: www.gazetaprawna.pl

In Poland most popular among foreign tourists are dental treatments, plastic surgery and health-resort treatment. Development and promotion of medical tourism is largely funded by the European Union, which is implemented under the Operational Program Innovative Economy ‘Promotion of Polish economy on international markets’ (PL: Program Operacyjny Innowacyjna Gospodarka „Promocja polskiej gospodarki na rynkach międzynarodowych”). The value of the project amounts to 4 million PLN. The program is being implemented in 2012-2015 and aims

mainly at the markets of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Russia, Great Britain and the USA. Activities taken under this program involve promotion of Polish medical tourism in those countries, as well as participation in international trade fairs, distribution of promotional materials and invitations for journalists and business entities to visit the Polish healthcare institutions.

### TRENDS IN MEDICAL TOURISM

Trends in medical tourism results mainly from the increase in awareness about health and change lifestyle. It is expected that in the near future, medical tourism will increase. According to forecasts by Deloitte regarding trips of Americans in search of medical care in other countries, in 2017 more than 15 million Americans will use this possibility, so it is over 15 times more than in 2007 [11].

Further development of medical tourism is affected by:

- reform of health care systems providing subsidies for the performance of certain services outside the country,
- lower prices of medical services in other countries,
- opportunity to improve the hospitals profitability and occupancy host countries,
- underdeveloped medical care in some countries,
- long waiting lists for surgery [12].

These are general factors that contribute positively to the development of medical tourism in the world. In case of Poland, however, the steady rising cost of health care in the European Union, seeking greater savings by citizens of other countries as a result of the effects of the economic crisis and the convenient location of Poland [13] in the neighborhood or vicinity of the developed countries with a clearly aging society must be also mentioned.

As a part of the medical tourism developing and competing entities, there should be expected the development of unique services, such as:

- dissemination of natural medicine,
- increasing popularity of ecological products and ecological approach to the medical business,
- development of medical tourism based on the holistic model of health,
- development of gastro-tourism, education and promotion of healthy nutrition,

- possibility of providing health services in more flexible way, for example in different locations indicated by the patient [14] – at home, hotel, workplace etc.

## SUMMARY

Medical tourism is a rapidly growing global market sector in which patients travel to neighboring or distant countries in order to receive medical care as a part of global trend of combining treatment with relaxation, sightseeing and many other services. Health tourism as a whole has significant advantages not only for patients, but also for business entities and the government. The main reason for taking activities aimed at promoting health services in Poland, taking by medical centers as well as government, is a possibility to obtain some additional funds. In the view of free movement of people across European Union it is predicted that this sector will undoubtedly continue to grow.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest.

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Received: 23.04.2015

Accepted for publication: 8.06.2015