

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# MEDICAL TOURISM IN GEORGIA: CURRENT BARRIERS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to determine the effective factors that influence the development of medical tourism in Georgia. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used for research. Within the qualitative research the experts of medical tourism were interviewed. Within the qualitative research this study investigates medical tourists' expectations and perceptions regarding healthcare services. Study tools were prepared on the basis of specially developed "Medical Outcomes Study, Patient Satisfaction Questionnaire" (MOS PSQ-III). The results reveal that policies and regulations, government support, costs, capacity problems, and the healthcare needs of the local community are the main barriers to the development of such tourism. Several strategies for lifting these barriers are suggested, such as new promotional activity policies, government action to encourage investment in the medical tourism market, and cooperative efforts by the hospitality sector and medical institutions to develop medical tourism products. This paper sheds light on a poorly researched field in the Georgian context. It provides directions for hospital managers to develop strategies which will meet patients' expectations of service quality and increase their competitiveness in the health tourism market.

**Keywords:** medical tourism, service quality, customer satisfaction, hospital, health services, Georgia

## INTRODUCTION

The medical tourism marketplace consists of a growing number of countries competing for patients by offering a wide variety of medical, surgical, and dental services. Medical tourists are traveling to developing countries for cosmetic surgery (Breast augmentation/breast reduction, Facelift/blepharoplasty, Liposuction/body contouring), dental procedures, bariatric surgery, assisted reproductive technology, ophthalmologic care, orthopedic surgery and spine surgery, cardiology and cardiac surgery (Coronary artery bypass, Cardiac valve replacement/reconstruction, Percutaneous coronary angioplasty/stenting, Stem cell therapy for heart failure), organ and tissue transplantation, gender reassignment procedures, and even executive health evaluations<sup>1</sup>.

Lower labor and living costs, the availability of inexpensive Pharmaceuticals allow many developing countries to offer some procedures at 10 per cent of the cost in the United States and other developed nations, inclusive of travel and accommodation<sup>2</sup>. Low administrative expenses or absence of malpractice insurance for medical practitioners also contributes to the affordability of medical tourist destinations. For example, the professional liability insurance premium for a surgeon in India is 4% of that for a surgeon in

New York<sup>1</sup>. National health programs do not typically pay for some type of services (for example cosmetic surgery) therefore patients from these countries desiring these procedures pursue medical tourism for the economic reasons<sup>1</sup>.

Patients also travel to medical tourism destinations to have procedures and technologies that are not yet available or approved in their countries. For example, In India, some hospitals perform conscious off-pump coronary artery bypass, a heart surgery designed for individuals who are not good candidates for surgery using anesthesia<sup>3</sup>. In addition, stem cell therapy for some of problems may be unavailable or restricted in developed countries but may be much more available in the medical tourism destinations.

Some patients seek medical procedures unavailable domestically owing to legal constraints, including organ transplantation from living donors motivated by poverty<sup>4,5</sup> or assisted reproduction using legally restricted technologies or paid surrogates<sup>6,7</sup>. Some patients, particularly those undergoing plastic surgery, sex change procedures, and drug rehabilitation, choose to go to medical tourism destinations because they are more confident that their privacy and confidentiality will be protected. Patients travel to medical tourism destinations for the

opportunity to travel to exotic locations and vacation in affordable luxurious surroundings<sup>1</sup>. An important consideration in medical tourism is the potential impact on the residents of destination countries. The medical tourism increases an inward flow of foreign currency, which supports economic development of the country, improvement of the infrastructure of medical institutions, thereby benefit the greater population<sup>8,9</sup>. The medical tourism decreases the migration of medical professionals to developed countries<sup>10</sup>.

The revenue generated by developing countries providing medical services to foreign patients creates opportunities to improve the access and quality of care available to the citizens of these countries<sup>10</sup>. Medical tourism has allowed some developing countries with smaller populations to sustain and subsidize advanced medical care and technology, as well as to maintain critical medical specialties with low domestic demand<sup>2</sup>.

The medical tourism increases global commercialization of health care. The medical tourism destinations in developing countries have lowered restrictions on foreign direct investment, which encourages growth of the health sector. Trade agreements may facilitate these investment flows<sup>10,11,12</sup>. Faced with the choice of many medical institutions in diverse countries, medical tourists may find it very difficult to identify well-trained physicians and modern hospitals that consistently provide high-quality care<sup>1</sup>. Some medical tourism agents may be a helpful resource for patients in making appropriate choices<sup>13,14,15</sup>. Accreditation by some international organization of standardization, such as for example, Cooperation for Transparency and Quality in Healthcare (KTQ), Joint Commission International (JCI) may provide a useful point of reference for patients selecting offshore medical facilities. Several healthcare institutions in Georgia have obtained accreditation from well-recognized international bodies (KTQ, JCI).

Today, Georgia provides comprehensive health services - curative, preventive, and rehabilitative - through public and private network of hospitals, clinics, polyclinics and specialized centers<sup>16,17,18</sup>. A wide range of specialist services are offered, including ophthalmology, orthopedic, fertility, cosmetic dentistry and plastic surgery<sup>19,20</sup>. According to the statistical information, annual income from tourism in Georgia is a 1,700,000,000 US\$. Georgia has a great potential in the field of medical tourism. Medical tourists can receive the following types of services: cosmetic dentistry, plastic surgery, ophthalmology (vision correction), heart bypass surgery, phage therapy (Tbilisi Phage Therapy Center is one of the

unique facilities in the world), reproductive health services (treatment of infertility, in vitro fertilization).

As to commercial potential, reproductive health is one of the key direction in medical sector. In the Zhordania Institute of Reproductology Ratio of foreign patients is 10-12%. Namely, childless couples come from Turkey, Iran, Arab countries, Russia, Ukraine. According to the reproductive scientists, there are a number of laws in Georgia that, unlike other countries, are liberal and make the field more attractive. Consequently, the services are cheaper and that is why foreign patients show interest in services.

Main advantage of treatment in Georgia is low prices for medical services. For example, surrogacy, including all stages of preparation, payment for services of medical personnel, control of pregnancy and childbirth, as well as payment of the fee a surrogate mother, is approximately about twenty thousand dollars. Similar services in Europe or America will cost several times more expensive. Besides cheap services in Georgia, there is unique climate, which helps pass the rapid rehabilitation after surgery and accelerate the healing process in general. Georgia is very rich of spa, ski and sea resorts. There are 103 resorts and 182 resort places in the country that are able to offer treatment, rehabilitation and recovery of various diseases. There are natural medicinal factors in Georgia - mineral water, mud, recreational climate and necessary conditions for their medicinal and prevention purposes. According to experts, all types of medical resorts are in Georgia. There are natural medicinal factors in Georgia - mineral water, mud, recreational climate and necessary conditions for their medicinal and prevention purposes.

In Georgia it is possible to develop specific types of medical tourism such as climatic (mountain, seashore, forest and field resorts) and balneological resorts (hydrotherapy, bath therapy). They were known in previous centuries. In Georgia development of resorts start at the turn of 19-20 centuries. From this period the tourism process begins in Borjomi and Abastumani, and later at the end of the 19th century on the Black Sea coast. In the 20th century, in soviet period, Georgian resorts were recognized as one of the best medical destinations.

Among the climatic resorts is particularly well known: Borjomi, Tskaltubo, Kobuleti, Abastumani, Akhtala, Bakuriani, Batumi, Bakhmaro, MtsvaneKontskhi, Nabeghlavi, Sairme, Tsemi, Surami. Among the balneological resorts are Tbilisi, Borjomi, Sairme, Tskaltubo, Nunisi, Ureki, Grigoleti, Utsera, Tsaihi, Tsikhisdziri, Tsemi, Tsagveri, Shovi, Java. Mountain climate is

distinguished with clean air. The biological effect of mountain climate is diverse: calm the nervous system, improves vital processes, activates metabolism, respiratory function, blood circulation and digestion, Increases the immunity system.

Black sea climate is humid subtropical and has medicinal properties. These climates successfully used for the treatment of cardiovascular, respiratory and nervous system diseases. From the seaside resorts, Ureki is distinguished with excellent magnetic sands.

In Georgia, there are about 2,000 mineral water sources, among which well-known resorts are Borjomi, Sairme, Lebarde, Shovi. Such mineral waters are used to treat digestive and endocrine system diseases.

Akhtala resort located in Gurjaani is an only resort for mud treatment in Georgia. Akhtala mud fits for healing bones and joints, peripheral nervous system, gynecological, dermatological, urological and other diseases. Rehabilitation of Akhtala resort started in April 2012 after World Bank allocated 3.5 million GEL loan.

The aim of this study is to determine the effective factors that influence the development of medical tourism in Georgia, also to assess the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction. Particularly we aimed to inquire the lack of qualifications, which function as the barriers to medical tourism development in this country. The finding will contribute to the literature by clarifying the barriers in medical tourism and can be generalized and applied to countries with similar situation; also the conclusion might practically be noticed by the authorities in order to address the current shortages.

### Materials and Methods

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used for research. Within the qualitative research the experts of medical tourism were interviewed. Within the quantitative research this study investigates medical tourists' expectations and perceptions regarding healthcare services. The research was conducted in different units of G. Chapidze Emergency Cardiology Center (Tbilisi, Georgia). The center was selected because it is the largest cardiology hospital in Georgia. The respondents of this research include medical tourists who have been hospitalized during the last year (January - December 2016 year).

Study tools were prepared on the basis of specially developed "Medical Outcomes Study, Patient Satisfaction Questionnaire" (MOS PSQ-III), third edition. The research instrument consists of 50 points and includes seven parts: general satisfaction of medical service, technical quality, interpersonal aspects, communication, financial aspects of service, time spent with physician and availability of services<sup>1</sup>. Respondents evaluated their agreement with statements on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". The collected data were analyzed by SPSS program.

The questionnaires were distributed to the patients upon check-in. Completed questionnaires were collected during check-out from patients who used the medical services of the hospital. A total of 95 questionnaires were distributed. Data was collected during January and December of 2016. Of 76 returned questionnaires, three were incomplete and excluded from further analysis. Thus, data analysis is based on a sample of 72 valid questionnaires representing a response rate of 75.8%.

### Ethics consideration

We have obtained approval from the Ethical Committee of G. Chapidze Emergency Cardiology Center to conduct the study. Prior to data collection, all study participants were given information on the study and assured that all data is confidential and will only be analyzed as aggregates. All respondents signed the informed consent form before participation.

### RESULTS

Majority of the participants (72.2%) were males. Most of the respondents (62.5%) were older than 56 years and were retired (40.3%). 70.8% of the respondents had finished secondary school, and 27.8% had a university degree. Socio-demographic structure of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Descriptive statistic was applied to determine patient expectations and perceptions regarding service quality at the hospital. In addition, gap analysis between patient expectations and perceptions of service quality was performed. Results of the analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of respondents (N=72)

Items	Respondents	
	Frequency	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	52	72.2
Female	20	27.8
<b>Age</b>		
18 - 35	3	4.2
36 - 45	8	11.1
46 - 55	16	22.2
56 - 65	23	31.9
66 and more	22	30.6
<b>Occupation</b>		
Employed	18	25
Unemployed	25	34.7
Retired	29	40.3
<b>Level of education</b>		
Secondary education	51	70.8
Higher education	20	27.8
Others	1	1.4

Source: Research results

## DISCUSSION

It is obvious that the respondents had high expectations as all mean values were above 4. The patients are satisfied with the level of service quality at the hospital. The positive SERVQUAL gap is evident, which means that perceived service quality was higher than expected. According to the survey of experts, there is a strong competition in medical tourism. With many countries where medical tourism is quite developed, it is difficult to compete. In such countries, a lot of money is spent on strengthening medical tourism. They offer many types of medical tourism to foreign clients. In this respect, Georgia has no diversity medical tourism. According to the majority of experts, due to the strong competition in medical tourism, it is advisable to offer specific services in Georgia that do not need large investments. Relatively inexpensive, but high quality specific services provided by international standards can make it attractive to foreign patients, even in a regional level. It should be noted, that in many countries, state health care programs do not cover such services as aesthetic medicine, many types of dental care services.

One of the major hindering factors in the development of medicinal tourism in Georgia is poor infrastructure. The network of hotels and tourism agencies is not sufficiently developed; as a result, the provision of shelter for tourists is poorly arranged. At the same time, the quality of services of existing private hotels is low.

Climatic resorts are mainly in highlands, where infrastructure is underdeveloped.

In recent years, special attention is paid to the development of road infrastructure. However, in most mountainous regions of Georgia the road system is disrupted. The relatively less developed domestic flights and sea transport. It is necessary to improve the road system, especially in mountainous places, because the potential for development of medical tourism in Georgia is concentrated in high mountain regions. It is necessary to expand the automobile network, especially in the highlands; it is advisable to develop internal transit, development of interregional flights, as well as restoration of maritime transport.

In some sections of the coastline there is an unsatisfactory sanitary-hygienic condition. Cleaning of the beach and maintaining the required sanitary norms are not regular. Sea pollution with various wastes is also common.

Experts note that there is no comprehensive database of medical tourism potential in Georgia. There are fewer advertisements about medicinal resorts. Moreover, most of the tourism agencies offer tourists lesser medical tours. Travel companies and medical sector should cooperate; unite efforts to develop medical tourism in the country. Considering this, it is necessary to create a complete electronic database about medical tourism potential in Georgia. It should include comprehensive information on clinical centers (the types of services and there prices) that will be available by internet.

Table 2: Evaluation of the expected and perceived service quality and gap between them in the cardiosurgery hospital

Very satisfied with care Some things could be better	Expected service quality (E)		Perceived service quality (P)		SERVQUAL gap (P-E)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<b>General Satisfaction</b>					
Very satisfied with care	4.0	1.1	4.1	0.9	0.1
Medical care is excellent	4.0	0.9	4.2	0.8	0.2
Care just about perfect	4.1	0.8	4.2	0.3	0.1
<b>Technical Quality</b>					
Careful to check everything	4.2	0.3	4.3	0.4	0.1
Office has everything needed	4.3	0.8	4.5	0.6	0.2
Know latest medical developments	4.0	0.7	4.1	0.4	0.1
Doctors competent, well-trained	4.2	0.4	4.2	0.3	0.0
Never expose me to risk	4.0	0.7	4.1	0.1	0.1
<b>Interpersonal Aspects</b>					
Do best to keep me from worrying	4.0	0.9	4.4	0.4	0.4
Genuine interest in me	4.0	0.9	4.2	0.2	0.2
Very friendly and courteous	4.0	0.8	4.6	0.6	0.5
<b>Communication</b>					
Explain the reason for tests	4.0	0.8	4.4	0.2	0.4
Say everything that's important	4.0	1.0	4.8	0.3	0.8
Doctors listen carefully	4.0	0.7	4.7	0.1	0.7
<b>Financial Aspects</b>					
Care without financial setback	4.1	0.9	4.5	0.2	0.4
Protected from financial hardship	4.0	0.5	4.5	0.5	0.5
Insured, protected financially	4.0	0.9	4.0	0.3	0.0
Amount I pay is reasonable	4.3	0.5	4.5	0.4	0.2
<b>Time Spent with Doctor</b>					
Doctors spend plenty of time	4.0	0.4	4.3	0.5	0.3
<b>Access/Availability/Convenience</b>					
Get hospital care without trouble	4.2	0.2	4.3	0.3	0.1
Easy to get care in an emergency	4.3	0.4	4.6	0.5	0.3
Care conveniently located	4.0	0.4	4.2	0.2	0.2
Can reach doctor for help with medical question	4.0	0.6	4.2	0.2	0.2
Office hours are convenient	4.2	0.3	4.4	0.5	0.2
Kept waiting at doctor's office	4.3	0.5	4.3	0.3	0.0
Easy access to specialists	4.1	0.6	4.2	0.4	0.1
Get medical care whenever need it	4.1	0.3	4.3	0.2	0.2

Source: Research results

The government of Georgia does not pay enough attention and does not provide funding to promote health services in the international market. It is important the effective role of government in terms of centralizing the comprehensive policymaking, reconfiguring and action regulations. The government must include medical tourism in tourism marketing strategies. It is advisable to carry out the selected medical suppliers for the implementation of medical tourism in the uniform regulatory system that ensures the quality of the relevant medical services. The government could provide the valid information on global market and encourage the organizations to assign the budget for research and development projects, improve their competitive advantage and notice the special training for their employees.

One of the main problems is communication skills. It implies on the effective and appropriate cultural competence that enables the health personals offer a cultural service particularly for each patient with different cultural and personal background. Cultural competence of organization, besides global networking could participate on how a medical institute might influence the competitors. The ability of health practitioners is the key factor to transfer the positive communication skills and cultural competence to the foreign patients. Accordingly, in order to provide these communication skills, expert training is required.

There is lack of centralized system for promotion and training. The government should promote providing free training for health practitioners working with foreign patients and encourage for

more competitive performance. Promotional programs through global marketing strategies could become as a part of national and organizational goals. There is lack of a unique brand in Georgia, which reduces its competitiveness. Accordingly, it is necessary, to promote global marketing strategies.

## CONCLUSION

Medical tourism development in Georgia is still in its introductory phase. Among the general economic benefits, medical tourism development generates the growth of investments, income, employment, and tax revenues, while social benefits arise from the improvement of health care system, standardization of health care service providing.

The factors identified by the research are the barriers that hinder the development of medical tourism. To overcome these problems in Georgia, government should reconfigure the policy and planning, especially in terms of promotion. Moreover, the problem of communication skills and training the specialist in medical tourism should be addressed. The key factor among the barriers is the lack of an efficient and centralized government support. The results have practical implications and suggest some recommendations to the managements of specialty hospitals. In order to gain competitive advantage in the health tourism market, specialty hospitals must improve the quality of services that come out of the field of medical services, such as hospitality services and they should meet the expectations of patients in accordance with market trends. Therefore, in order to improve service quality, it is necessary to understand the importance of additional services provided by specialty hospitals, as well as to continue the survey of customer satisfaction and service quality.

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