



DENTAL TOURISM IN SHKODRA IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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Abstract— Dental tourism is an important segment of the growing health tourism industry. Patients generate relevant tourism revenue for the destination country beyond the dental clinics' direct income. The aim of this study is to evidence the situation of these phenomena last year in Shkodra. **Methodology:** This is a cross-sectional study. The populations of study are: dentists, patients and travel agency workers. The time of this study was January - March 2023. The study was conducted using interviews. We interviewed dentists in different locations of the city, three workers from different travel agencies and the correspondent patients who have traveled to Shkodra for dental care. All these interviews are done face to face, anonymously and voluntarily. The data is calculated and analyzed in Microsoft Office Excel 2010. **Results:** The majority of patients who came to Shkodra for dental care was born in Shkodra and lives abroad. The main reasons that they prefer Shkodra are the low costs and the relationship with their families and friends. The busiest dental tourism period is the holiday season like Christmas, New Year, and Easter and summer vacation. Travel agencies admit having clients, who come for dental tourism but they still do not have a strategy to provide these services. **Conclusions:** The city itself can benefit much more from the dental business with greater involvement of tourism offices. While today the primary motivation is medical treatment, in the future it would be the tourist experience with dental treatment as a by-product. A combination with dental tourism can develop Shkodra into a medical destination, where returning immigrants come to see their relatives and foreign tourists come to get healthier and relax. Hence, dental tourism in Shkodra could be a sustainable future tourism form.

Keywords: dental, care, tourism, Shkodra.

I. INTRODUCTION

Patient mobility is increasing for medical services. Medical services can be categorized as preventive medical services, fertility, dental care, surgery, cosmetic surgery, organ, cell and tissue transplants, and cardiology [1]. Medical tourism industry is growing fast. Dental tourism is a rapidly growing segment within the health tourism industry. It not only generates direct income for dental clinics but also contributes to the overall tourism revenue of the destination country.

The research is focusing on the tourism components of a specific medical treatment abroad. Medical tourism captured worldwide attention only in 2006, when medical journals started to publish papers on the topic, as awareness of the phenomenon in both developing and industrial countries was increasing [2].

'Dental tourism' is driven by numerous factors. Jurišić, E., & Cegur Radović, T. (2017) refer that these factors include the high cost of local care, delays in obtaining access to local dentists, competent care at many international clinics, inexpensive air travel, and the Internet's capacity to link individuals seeking health-related services with providers. Although dental tourism benefits some patients, increased patient mobility brings forth numerous risks, like lack of access to affordable and timely local care, which plays a significant role in prompting patients to cross borders and receive dental care outside their local communities [3].

The rise in patient mobility is a result of multiple socio-economic factors. First, in some countries private dental care is unaffordable for many patients. The high price of local procedures drives individuals to find comparatively

inexpensive dental procedures.

Second, patients unable to obtain prompt access to local dental care look beyond their communities in search of timely dental treatment. Third, patients understand that lower prices for dental care need not result in low quality care. Some patients return home satisfied with the quality of care they receive elsewhere. Fourth, economy air travel makes the cost of transportation considerably less expensive than the price of many dental procedures [4].

Reviewing the dental tourism research we found different studies about this subject. Österle et al. (2009) investigated Hungary's ability to attract dental tourists [5]. Barrowman et al (2010) for Dental implant tourism [6], Carmagnola (2012) investigate the perception of dental tourism by Italian patients who have recently received dental care abroad [7], Kovacs, E., & Szocska, G. (2013) evidenced the reasons for maintaining a leading position for Hungary in dental tourism [8]. Jaapar, Musa, Moghavvemi, and Saub (2017) measured tourist profiles, travel motivation and satisfaction among inbound dental tourists in Malaysia [9]. Lovelock, Lovelock, and Lyons (2018) report on the perceived impacts of dental tourism on the generating region of New Zealand [10], Adams, K., et al (2018) evidenced new insight in to the ways in which the medical tourism industry raises ethical concern and the structures of power informing unethical practices [11]. The proposed model, by Ahmadimanesh, F., Paydar, M. M., & Asadi-Gangraj, E. (2019) includes sections such as travel agencies, tour operators, restaurants, transportation, and recreation centers that can be incorporated into future researches for dental tourism.[12] All of these researches evidenced that the dental tourism seems to be more neighboring countries phenomena than global [12].

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II. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive cross-sectional study. The aim of this study is to evidence the situation of this phenomenon last year in Shkodra. The populations of study are: dentists, patients and travel agency workers. The time of this study was January - March 2023. The study was performed using interviews. We interviewed dentists in different locations of the city, three workers from different travel agencies and the correspondent patients who have traveled to Shkodra for dental care. All of these interviews have been conducted face to face, anonymously and voluntarily. All the records are included and were processed with Microsoft Office Excel 2010.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The questionnaire and interviews were answered by 16 dentists who exercise their profession in Shkodra. 40% of them have over 10 years work experience, 20% of them have 1-5 years and 20% have 5-10 years. 53% are employed near a private clinic, 40% are self-employed, 7% work in public healthcare. 93% of them offer service for all ages, meanwhile a small percentage (7%) offer service only for adults. All of them say that they have Albanian immigrant customers that reenter the country for dental care, meanwhile 94% admit that foreigners come to get dental services. Most of the doctors, 87.5% to be exact, conclude that clients come to them with acquaintances from family, friends and colleagues. The clients of 37.5% are returning customers, as they grew up in Shkodra and now come back from abroad to take these services. Almost half of the dentists (43.8 %) say that some of their customers came from social media advertisements. Only 25% of the dentists admit that their customers came from tourism agencies. In cases when the dentists have foreign customers, they inform the foreigners themselves on topics such as: information on services or facilities such as hotels (25%), offers or packaged services (62.5%), or tourism opportunities (31.3%).

Regarding the offered dental services, it is stated that they offer almost all services possible. It is a fact that 100% of them offer consultation, examination, scaling and polishing, simple filling, crown/bridge/veneer, teeth whitening, root canal treatment, and orthodontics. Only 87% of them offer oral surgery, dentures, implants, and gum surgery. When the doctors and patients were asked separately about the reason why the patients travel from abroad for the offered services, it was said by both parties, that the prices are lower in Albania than in the countries they come from, the time to get the service is considerably larger, and some of the patients have no health insurance where they live. As said by the respondents the quality of the service in Shkodra is very good. While the immigrants can use the free time from this trip to meet up with their relatives, the foreigners can use the time for tourism.

50% of doctors report working throughout the year, while the other 50% mention that their clients predominantly visit during the summer season, taking advantage of vacations and official holidays. However, only 12.5% state that they have customers who also seek dental services outside of the

vacation or holiday periods. When it comes to communication or collaboration with tourist agencies, 75% of doctors do not engage in such partnerships, whereas 25% claim to have cooperated with tourist agencies for customer insurance or service promotion. It is a fact that 88% of doctors see it as a promising opportunity to collaborate with an agency or hotel in the future to increase their client base. However, only 80% of them believe that dental tourism will be a sustainable form of tourism in the future.

During the review of the literature, we found a study related to dental tourism in Albanian by Nexhipi, O. 2018, where revealed some interesting findings. Women travelled for dental care more than man. The overall mean age was 38 years which means that people tend to seek dental care in Albania while they are young. While dental tourists may possibly travel for an array of reasons, their choices are usually motivated by price considerations. This was also revealed by the results of the study, people travel to Albania for dental care due to low price. And they advise it to other people due to low price. Quality is an element that attracts people to come to Albania for dental care, and in the meantime based on the questionnaires Albanians that live in Albania consider the dental service as a good one and there is no one that thinks dental service is absolutely bad.[13]

Even in our study, the majority of patients who seek dental care in Shkoder are those who were born in Shkoder but currently reside outside the country. The primary reason they choose to receive care here is due to the affordable costs and the opportunity to connect with their families and friends. The busiest period for dental tourism in Shkoder coincides with popular holiday seasons such as Christmas, New Year, Easter, and the summer vacation period.

Tourist agencies acknowledge that they have clients who visit for dental tourism, but they currently lack a strategy to provide these services.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Looking at it from this point of view, the city itself can benefit greatly by incorporating dental businesses into existing tourist establishments. While the primary motivation today is medical treatment, in the future, it can evolve into a tourism experience combined with dental services as a byproduct. The combination of dental tourism and regular tourism has the potential to transform Shkodra into a medical destination, attracting both Shkodra's diaspora who visit their relatives and foreign tourists seeking improved health and relaxation.

Dental tourism could strongly contribute to the country's image and help to prolong the seasonality of tourism activity by enhancing the strategic marketing of dental clinics and tourism agencies toward sustainable health tourism. So, dental tourism in Shkoder has the potential to become a sustainable form of tourism in the future. Therefore, it can be stated that sustainable development is also achieved through health tourism, especially since tourism is based on a direct link between consumers (the tourists) and the industry, the environment, and the local communities.

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