

Sustainable Health Tourism in the Plastic Surgery Sector in Turkey

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ABSTRACT: Health tourism refers to the practice of seeking medical treatment, undergoing surgical operations, or receiving medical care in nations or regions other than one's own. Plastic surgery is a crucial component of health tourism, as it is a popular medical specialty for both aesthetic and reconstructive objectives. This contributes to the sustained expansion of health tourism in this field.

The health tourism and plastic surgery industries are experiencing steady growth in both Turkey and globally. The expansion of these industries is linked to highly skilled healthcare practitioners, technological progress, and rising patient expectations. Ensuring the maintenance of quality standards and ethical practices is crucial for the future viability of these industries. Effective management of health tourism and plastic surgery is crucial to maintain long-term growth and the safety of patients.

The global health tourism and plastic surgery sectors have experienced significant growth. Turkey has become a prominent participant in this aspect. This study conducted a comprehensive analysis of the existing conditions and potential developments in the health tourism and plastic surgery industries in Turkey and globally, by reviewing relevant literature.

KEYWORDS: Health Tourism, Plastic Surgery, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Health tourism is a form of tourism where individuals receive health care while also enjoying transportation, accommodation, and leisure activities. Individuals have the option to participate in medical tourism, which involves traveling to other nations or areas to access healthcare facilities that provide more cost-effective prices or superior service standards. Medical tourism encompasses a range of services such as medical treatments, plastic surgery, dental treatments, thermal spas, rehabilitation, and other health-related services (Dalan & Saltık, 2021: 1454).

Additionally, it is further categorized into subcategories, including medical tourism, thermal tourism, senior tourism, and disability tourism. Medical tourism has become increasingly popular, particularly due to the rise in the number of older individuals (Arkin & Salha, 2023: 68). The high cost of delivering healthcare services in industrialized countries can be attributed to various factors that are closely linked to elevated levels of education and prosperity. Specifically, the healthcare requirements of the elderly population and the percentage of healthcare expenses are steadily rising in developed nations. This rise leads to an escalation in social security expenses, exerting pressure on social security organizations. In order to tackle these problems, social security institutions and private insurance companies are actively working together with medical tourism companies in nations renowned for their excellent healthcare services, with the aim of delivering healthcare services at reduced expenses.

These endeavors enable patients to get high-quality healthcare services while also reducing the cost of therapy (Bulut & Şengül, 2019: 47). Health tourism is increasingly popular because of the high cost, sluggishness, and bureaucracy associated with healthcare in affluent Western nations. Due to the exorbitant expenses associated with healthcare, those lacking health insurance or possessing inadequate coverage are unable to access essential medical treatment and care inside their respective nations. This particularly applies to individuals who hold US citizenship (Cortez, 2008: 81).

Health tourism refers to a comprehensive package that involves the movement of people across borders to obtain goods and services that cater to their healthcare requirements. Health tourism can be described as the collection of services that patients receive from the time they leave their usual living environment, often with their companions, until they return after completing their treatment.

Health tourism refers to a form of tourism undertaken with the purpose of enhancing one's overall health condition. Individuals use spas, thermal springs, and drinking water sources with the intention of restoring their well-being, safeguarding their health, and receiving medical care. In addition, they undergo balneotherapy, including mud and seawater baths, as well as receive climate-based therapies. Regardless, all journeys undertaken for this specific aim are referred to as health tourism (Pehlivan, 2009: 22).

Sustainable Health Tourism in The Plastic Surgery Sector in Turkey

The primary factors influencing the patient's decision to seek medical treatment abroad include healthcare regulations, administrative red tape, lengthy waiting times, service quality, national income per capita of various countries, personal income, cost of services, ease of transportation, availability of luxury accommodations, quality of the healthcare and tourism industries, as well as social, political, and psychological considerations and promotional efforts (Crooks, 2017; 4). The absence of insurance coverage for some aesthetic and dental procedures contributes to the growth of health tourism as individuals seek these services abroad due to the increased demand and availability. The growing popularity of elective cosmetic procedures like liposuction, breast augmentation, and buttock augmentation in the field of aesthetic surgery is fueling the growth of health tourism by generating a fresh demand (Connell, 2006: 1094).

1. HEALTH TOURISM IN TURKEY

The Ministry of Health in Turkey, namely the General Directorate of Health Services, Department of Health Tourism, is responsible for overseeing all aspects of health tourism, including inter-institutional cooperation and the advancement of health tourism. The "Health Tourism Unit" was founded under the General Directorate of Primary Health Care Services of the Ministry of Health, with the authorization of the Authority on March 31, 2010, as documented by approval number 18529. The unit was transferred to the General Directorate of Treatment Services on May 5, 2011, and was renamed as the Health Tourism Coordinatorship. In accordance with Decree Law No. 663, the Ministry underwent reorganization as stated in Official Gazette No. 02.11.2011. As part of this restructuring, the Department of Health Tourism was established within the General Directorate of Health Services (<https://saglik.gov.tr>).

The subject of accreditation holds significant importance in the context of health tourism. Health tourists prioritize obtaining accreditation certifications from health institutions when going worldwide. Accreditation is the process of adhering to the standards established by a country or organization that governs health tourism in order to ensure the quality of services (Tontuş, 2015: 55). Turkey's favorable geographical location, climate, access to the sea, plenty of thermal water resources, extensive forests, plateaus, and well-equipped health facilities staffed by experienced and highly trained personnel make it an exceptionally suitable destination for health tourism.

Furthermore, the presence of a national carrier like Turkish Airlines, which offers flights to the highest number of destinations globally, positions Turkey as an exceptional choice for health tourism due to its convenient transportation options. Given its historical legacy, distinctive natural landscapes, favorable climate, vibrant culture, and the presence of traditional spas and Turkish baths, Turkey possesses significant potential to excel in the advancement of contemporary health and thermal tourism (Çetin, 2022: 641).

Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are the countries with the highest demand for elderly care and thermal tourism from outside. On the other hand, inhabitants of the UK and the Netherlands are increasingly choosing Turkey for medical treatments. Conversely, tourists hailing from Middle Eastern nations have increasingly shown a preference for thermal facilities and spa centers as venues for spa treatment, particularly for eye treatment, aesthetic surgery, and hair transplantation (Turkey Health Foundation Report, 2010: 52).

2. AESTHETIC SURGERY IN TURKEY

Proficient and up-to-date expert teams, along with individuals possessing strong language and communication abilities, will confer a competitive edge in marketing the medical tourism sector. For the purpose of enhancing the level of service provided to tourists seeking aesthetic surgery, it is imperative that doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals possess enough proficiency in foreign languages. Even when utilizing cutting-edge technology, Turkey's ability to provide services at competitive prices is largely a result of its low labor force and service production costs (Türsab, 2014). The field of aesthetic surgery involves a comprehensive decision-making process that encompasses assessing the patient's requirements and overseeing their recovery. Once the necessity has been established, the patient gathers information regarding available treatment options and requirements and subsequently selects a preferred option from the various alternatives. Individuals have the option to either utilize an intermediary institution or directly select a health facility to perform these procedures, if desired. Tourists seeking aesthetic surgery treatments in Turkey benefit from the absence of waiting times and the presence of authorized health institutions, which enhances the efficiency of procedures in the marketing mix (<https://saglik.gov.tr>).

2.1. Government Incentives And Supports In Turkey

State support refers to a system in which the government offers aid to firms with the aim of helping them overcome economic bottlenecks or crises or to enhance the overall strength of the economy. Turkey subsidizes certain activities of organizations within its borders to enhance its international competitiveness in the service sectors, generate foreign currency, boost revenues, expand into foreign markets, and establish a strong brand presence (Tengilimoğlu, 2021: 6).

The health tourism sector in our country offers various forms of assistance to organizations, including support for market entry, patient travel, foreign promotion, fairs, congresses, conferences, search engine advertising, promotion, foreign units, international certification, trade and procurement delegations, and consultancy services (<https://saglik.gov.tr>).

3. REASONS FOR AESTHETIC SURGERY DEMAND

Individuals seek aesthetic procedures to address dissatisfaction with their facial and bodily appearance, aiming to improve their psychological well-being, enhance life satisfaction, and boost self-confidence (Demirbaş, 2019: 83). Ensuring a high level of patient satisfaction is crucial. The applications for cosmetic surgery encompass many reasons, expectations, and objectives. Hence, it is imperative to ascertain the presence of a suitable applicant for the procedure before its commencement. Nevertheless, the motivations, anticipations, and objectives of individuals seeking plastic and aesthetic surgery might vary significantly. In order to ensure the appropriateness of a patient for surgery, it is imperative to conduct a thorough evaluation before the procedure (Temizkan, S. & Temizkan, R, 2020: 286).

Aesthetic procedures enable individuals to attain their desired appearance by addressing specific concerns they have with certain sections of their bodies. There are disparities in the expectations placed on men and women. Women desire to enhance their visual appeal and attractiveness, while men aspire to optimize their functionality and physical activity. According to Frederick (2007: 15), aesthetic surgery has been found to significantly enhance people's pleasure, particularly with their appearance, leading to increased happiness. Women exhibit a higher prevalence of undergoing aesthetic surgery compared to men. Upon examining the research, various factors influence an individual's perception of cosmetic surgery, including physical attractiveness, anxiety related to age, dissatisfaction with one's body, and the impact of media (Slevec & Tiggermann, 2010: 65).

The objective of aesthetic surgical procedures is to enhance the physical appearance of the body in a way that elicits a sense of beauty in both the person and society. The individual may desire a more youthful appearance or seek to alter their physique as a result of discontentment with their body (Körpe, 2017: 225).

4. HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF AESTHETIC SURGERY

Plastic surgery can be divided into two subcategories: reconstructive surgery, which focuses on repairing and restoring bodily structures, and aesthetic surgery, which aims to enhance appearance. The medical procedures carried out on injured individuals during the First and Second World Wars proved to be efficacious in advancing the field of reconstructive surgery. The differentiation between cosmetic and reconstructive surgery was not present throughout these years, but it became evident in the post-war era (Sevim & Sevim, 2014: 68).

The inaugural aesthetic surgery association was founded in Chicago in 1921, officially recognizing aesthetic surgery as a distinct division of plastic surgery. The establishment of the Turkish Plastic Surgery Association took place in 1961, as documented by Ergenekon in 2006 (p. 61).

The first printed work in Turkish-Islamic literature, titled *Cerrahiyetül Haniyye* (Imperial Surgery) by Sabuncuoğlu Şerafettin (1385-1468), has detailed descriptions and illustrations of several plastic surgery procedures. Evidence suggests that Turkish plastic surgery procedures have a long history. The development of plastic surgery in Turkey, like in other countries worldwide, occurred mostly following the two main global conflicts, particularly World War II (source: <https://plastikcerrahi.org.tr/>). Although aesthetic surgery used to be expensive a decade ago, it has now become accessible to individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds, particularly the middle class. It has evolved into a lifestyle choice that is not only embraced by celebrities but also by ordinary people, providing them with benefits (Featherstone, 2010: 205).

5. AESTHETIC SURGERY APPLICATION AREAS

The International Aesthetic Plastic Surgery Association has divided aesthetic surgery procedures into 3 categories; surgical procedures applied to the breast area, surgical procedures applied to the face area, surgical procedures applied to the body and extremities. Table 1 shows this classification.

Table 1. Classification of Areas Where Plastic Surgery is Applied

Breast Area	Face Area	Body and Extremities
* Breast Augmentation		
* Augmentation mammoplasty	* Brow Lift	* Abdominoplasti
* Breast Reduction	* Ear Surgery	*Buttock Augmentation
* Reduction Mammoplasty	* Otoplasty	
* Breast Lift	* Eyelid Surgery	* Buttock Lift
* Mastopexy	* Blepharoplasty	
* Gynecomastia	* Facelift	* Liposuction
* Breast Implant Removal	* Facial Bone Contouring	* Thigh Lift
	* Fat Grafting (Face	* Lift Body Lower
	* Neck Lift	* Upper Arm Lift
		* Brachioplasty
	* Rhinoplasty	* Labiaplasty

Source: International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery ISAPS, 2020.

6. DEVELOPING HEALTH TOURISM IN TURKEY

To effectively promote the influence of countries in health tourism, it is crucial to first identify the target audience and then disseminate information using various communication means. The deliberate utilization of suitable methodologies, strategies, and communication tools to educate the intended audience on a certain issue, guide them towards the desired behavior, and convince them to purchase the offered service or product (Azimi, 2017: 92).

Health tourism necessitates the provision of information to patients seeking aesthetic operations in Turkey. This includes addressing their pre-treatment concerns, ensuring post-treatment satisfaction, and sharing their experiences on hospital and clinic websites as well as through social media platforms (Rerkrujipimol & Assenov, 2011: 99). The success of countries with a significant presence in the global health and tourism business can be attributed to factors such as scientific research, consistent efforts, and well-coordinated promotional operations. This industry has had significant growth and has gained increasing importance in recent years. The patient's decision to seek treatment in a foreign country rather than their own is influenced by the objective and subjective data images that are repeatedly promoted and built in their mind through advertising campaigns (Crooks, 2011: 1).

The main principle of promotion is simplicity. The principle of simplicity entails conveying a concept, opinion, or system to a general audience in the most easily comprehensible manner. The presence of people with diverse cultural backgrounds in the audience may pose a challenge for certain individuals in comprehending the message. Therefore, the advertising message should be composed of basic shapes, figures, numerical data, and slogans instead of a complex structure (Olalı, 1983: 43).

Istanbul is marketed as a distinct destination with unique slogans, such as "Love of Continents," while efforts are made to cultivate the overall "Turkey" brand alongside the development of the "Istanbul brand." Upon examining campaigns across various markets, it is evident that the human aspect is largely utilized, with a focus on depicting real-life scenarios (Gündoğdu, 2008: 104). To attain the targeted objective, a well-structured promotional strategy targeting the specific market should be devised following thorough research. When promoting to a certain audience inside the same country, it is important to consider demographic factors such as age, gender, income level, and age (Altunbaş, 2012: 14). Typically, when the promoter is a trusted or beloved individual or group, it has a stronger impact on people's credibility perception (Rızaoğlu, 2004: 126).

It is important to guarantee that Turkey is considered a top choice when an individual or their relatives require healthcare services and that people in their social circle actively suggest Turkey as a destination. The message conveyed in this process must be unambiguous, concise, persuasive, and comprehensible (Burgucu, 2013: 136). The effectiveness of the promotional efforts is directly correlated with the timing of their execution. For instance, if a conference event with a gathering is scheduled in Germany, the months of January and February pose a risk owing to adverse weather conditions, which may result in lower-than-anticipated participation from adjacent nations (Suher, 2012: 28).

It is more advantageous and efficient for a patient who finishes their treatment in our country and then returns to their own country to speak highly and suggest our country in their social circle, compared to all other promotional initiatives. One of the main concerns for patients in the field of health tourism is the accreditation certificate of healthcare facilities. An accreditation certificate serves as a guarantee of the quality and reliability of healthcare facilities and countries that specialize in health tourism. According to Tontuş (2015: 55), international patients who travel for medical treatment consider this matter their top priority.

Health tourism involves patients seeking medical treatment in nations that offer both high quality and affordable healthcare services (Hanefeld, 2013: 4). To establish a strong presence in the global health tourism market, Turkey's research efforts should prioritize highlighting the significance of accreditation, implementing effective and active promotional campaigns abroad, increasing the number of qualified personnel proficient in foreign languages, and undertaking developmental initiatives to optimize the utilization of infrastructure facilities (Buzcu & Birdir, 2019: 1). In addition to hospitals and clinics, non-medical companies also offer services related to health tourism (Ulusoy, 2018: 26).

Medical tourism encompasses not only healthcare services but also additional services such as housing and transportation that are offered during the healing process (Köstepen, 2015: 26).

Quality service delivery is a crucial aspect of the development of medical tourism, alongside the advantage of lower prices. The factors that contribute to the attractiveness of a country for medical tourism include the education and experience level of doctors, their foreign language skills, the efficiency of healthcare personnel, the waiting and treatment times, the accessibility of healthcare services, the respect for cultural differences, the adherence to privacy and confidentiality rules, and the use of advanced medical devices.

Countries that can provide high-quality services that meet the expectations of patients are more likely to attract medical tourists. To attain success in medical tourism, whether as a nation or a healthcare facility, it is imperative to guarantee patient contentment through the provision of high-quality service. Many patients opt to seek medical treatment in a foreign country due to the extended waiting periods for treatment in their own countries. This allows them to receive faster service and avoid the delays they would experience at home (Nicolaidis, 2011: 8, Aktepe, 2013: 172).

Furthermore, there are concerns that might potentially have a detrimental impact on healthcare services in Turkey, a country that has gained recognition globally for its high-quality service provision and cost-effective edge. The primary factors are the

Sustainable Health Tourism in The Plastic Surgery Sector in Turkey

insufficiency of intermediary institutions, the scarcity of skilled personnel, unsuitable pricing, and so forth. To address the limitations in the domain of medical tourism, it is imperative to enhance collaboration between sectors and devise methods to bolster areas of weakness. To ensure Turkey's continued competitiveness in the medical tourism industry, it is crucial to design and implement a robust control mechanism in collaboration with sector players (Kılınç, 2017: 141).

Medical tourism refers to the act of traveling to foreign countries in order to seek medical treatment. Patients sometimes travel to other countries in search of superior medical practices due to factors such as exorbitant healthcare costs and lengthy waiting times in wealthy nations. While the main objective is "treatment," patients derive advantages from the offerings of the tourism industry, including travel programs, food and beverage, housing, and transportation (Tengilimoğlu, 2013: 59; Özgül, 2014: 16–17).

The quality of national health care in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir has been enhanced in recent years due to the advancement of contemporary technologies and increased state-sponsored investments in Turkey. Due to this condition, Turkey has become a prominent market for medical tourism in Europe, the Middle East, and Russia. Furthermore, its geographical position makes it a focal point for economically disadvantaged nations in Europe, such as Albania, as well as former Soviet Bloc countries like Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (Zengingönül, 2012: 15).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Health is a crucial component of an individual's existence. Individuals desire to preserve their well-being and enhance their immunity against illnesses. When an individual's health deteriorates, they may encounter various adverse circumstances, both physically and emotionally, leading to the sensation of negative emotions. Health tourism revolves around the concept of health. Due to its strategic geopolitical location, high-quality healthcare services, affordable healthcare options, diverse geographical landscape, stunning natural and historical attractions, minimal waiting periods, and the availability of therapies not covered by insurance, Turkey stands out as a prominent destination for health tourism. It is advisable to promote the utilization of medical services in Turkey among Turkish expatriates.

In recent years, Turkey has emerged as a leading destination for hair transplantation. Istanbul is widely regarded as the primary hub for hair transplantation treatment and attracts a significant number of international visitors seeking this procedure. The success of the healthcare system is attributed to the comparatively lower prices in comparison to other countries, as well as the presence of highly skilled doctors, nurses, and technicians. To establish a brand for Turkey, it is crucial to activate the involvement of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Enhancing communication between these ministries and offering targeted promotions that fit the needs of the nation can help with this. Efficient execution of promotional and marketing endeavors is crucial for the success of health tourism. Countries that make a positive impact on tourists have a significant advantage when it comes to promotion and marketing, whereas countries that create negative impressions face a disadvantage in terms of promotion and marketing. It is possible to construct a variety of campaigns and promotions.

In order to effectively promote and market internationally, it is crucial to receive governmental backing. This funding should be utilized to carry out promotions in a remarkable and reasonable manner, with the assistance of specialists. Additionally, staging fairs or congresses can be an efficient means of providing information about Turkey's health system. Health tourism is a growing market that is increasingly contributing to the global economy. The income generated from health tourism is steadily increasing, making it a popular industry worldwide. Countries that excel in this field have the possibility of gaining recognition on a broader scale. Enhancing the quantity and caliber of both theoretical and practical research is crucial for the advancement of plans and programs. Nations have the ability to enhance and expand their infrastructure and superstructures, as well as educate healthcare and tourism professionals. To do this, it is imperative to expedite the efforts in determining the legislation.

The inclusion of intermediary organizations and agencies in the process should be formalized, with measures in place to avoid potential fraud and mitigate activities that could harm the country's reputation. Efforts should be made to streamline the process of entering and leaving the nation, while the Ministry of Health should regulate prices to mitigate any instances of unfair competition. This involves presenting the credentials and academic research of the staff, highlighting the adherence to high quality standards, and promoting health tourism on an international scale based on the studies conducted by countries involved in providing such services. The objectives include establishing health treaties among nations, enhancing cross-border information exchange, forging strategic alliances domestically and internationally, facilitating technology and knowledge transfer, fostering international relations through the sharing of social and cultural experiences, and signing reciprocal protocols.

All entities within the sector, including insurance organizations, travel agents, accommodation providers, and recognized health facilities, serve as integral components of the overall system. It is imperative to establish coordination among them and negotiate agreements to decrease the expenses associated with overseas travel and lodging, thereby enhancing the element of trust. Efforts should be made to coordinate transportation, housing, accompaniment, pricing, medical treatment quality, information about the appropriate health institution, and cultural activities for incoming health tourists. Upon the completion of treatment, it is essential to create a patient file documenting all procedures in the patient's native language. This file should be provided to the patient in both printed and electronic formats.

Sustainable Health Tourism in The Plastic Surgery Sector in Turkey

Additionally, arrangements should be made to transfer the patient to the airport and ensure a smooth departure, minimizing any potential concerns or difficulties. The apprehension of being unable to oversee and regulate their ailment concerns individuals, and this circumstance detrimentally impacts their inclination to seek medical treatment overseas. Upon the patient's repatriation, it is imperative to establish contact within the initial week, first month, and third month to assess their overall condition.

Patients who travel to Turkey for treatment may lack proficiency in Turkish, which is necessary for effective communication, as well as English, the widely used international language. In this scenario, the healthcare industry would be equipped with interpreters proficient in several languages to enhance communication with patients and promote better health outcomes. The state will provide additional incentives for healthcare staff to work in intermediary institutions and firms in response to the growing number of personnel who are fluent in other languages.

In order to enhance patient satisfaction, it is imperative that all the components of the chain are intact and uninterrupted. The patient will be asked for their cooperation in the future to contribute to the promotion on online platforms. It is important to prioritize the prominence of Turkish medicine on the global stage.

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Sustainable Health Tourism in The Plastic Surgery Sector in Turkey

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