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DENTAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES IN ARMENIA

Dental tourism is a type of medical tourism when patients travel abroad for receiving dental services and treatment. The purpose of dental tourism is to get quality dentistry at a more affordable price and with the use of more modern technologies.

Dental tourism is becoming increasingly popular, especially among the population of countries where the cost of dental services is high or their availability is limited.

Armenia has high opportunities for dental tourism development. Many tourists come to Armenia for dentistry services. The main methods used in the article are: desk review, interview and SWOT analysis. Based on the interview results among dental tourists, Armenia is a preferable destination for dental tourism based on its affordable prices and high-quality services. The article explores the main issues and prospects for dental tourism promotion in Armenia. Some recommendations were done towards improving marketing, statistical recording, quality of services, processing development programs, creating online med-portal of dental services, applying for international accreditations and certifications etc.

Keywords: *dental tourism, dentistry, implant, marketing, med-portal, accreditation and certification*

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INTRODUCTION. Dental tourism is a form of medical tourism when patients travel abroad to receive dental services and treatment. The purpose of this type of tourism is to get quality dentistry at a more affordable price or with the use of more modern technologies.

Dental tourism is becoming increasingly popular, especially among the population of countries where the cost of dental services is high or their availability is limited. Patients seek dental treatment such as implants, root canal treatment, prosthetics or cosmetic dentistry in countries where dental services are offered at more attractive prices while maintaining a high level of quality.

For dental tourism, it is important to choose reliable and experienced dental clinics and specialists, as well as carefully plan the medical trip. Patients can also combine dental treatment with sightseeing and entertainment, thus obtaining a complete dental tourism experience.

When considering a dental tourism destination, it's crucial to consider several factors: quality of dental care, price, tourism attractions, travel expenses, language and communication, safety and regulations.

Armenia also has some opportunities for dental tourism development. However, there are still numerous problems which need careful analysis and comprehensive work. The article analyzes the current state of dental tourism in Armenia, explores the main issues of development and provides some recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW. This part presents some studies on dental tourism and tourist motivations.

Dental tourism is driven by numerous factors. 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 customers to sellers of health-related services¹.

A study by Jaapar et al. measures tourist profiles, travel motivation and satisfaction among inbound dental tourists in Malaysia. The study sampled twelve selected private dental clinics in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Melaka and Penang; and distributed the questionnaires to their inbound dental tourists. A total of 196 inbound tourists responded to the questionnaire, mainly from Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. In order of importance, the main motivation factors were dental care quality, dental care information access, and cost-savings. Tourists were extremely satisfied with dental care services received in the country. While dental care quality, dental care information access and supporting services positively influenced tourist satisfaction; cost-savings and cultural similarities had negative influences².

Zoltan & Maggi have analyzed the case study of Hungary's dental tourism. The country's competitiveness in dental tourism is based on its low prices, high

¹ Turner, L. (2008). Cross-border dental care: 'dental tourism' and patient mobility. *British dental journal*, 204(10), 553-554. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.2008.403>

² Jaapar, M., Musa, G., Moghavvemi, S., & Saub, R. (2017). Dental tourism: Examining tourist profiles, motivation and satisfaction. *Tourism Management*, 61, 538-552, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.02.023>

quality, modern technology, central location³.

India's accessibility and availability of quality assured and cost-effective dental treatment has exponentially fostered the bloom of India in "dental tourism". Steep costs, lack of health insurance and dental benefits are key factors pushing low-income western world families to obtain cross-country dental care. Dental Tourism companies and corporate dental chains are increasingly advertising "all inclusive" travel packages that include dental procedures, hotel room reservations, side trips to tourist attractions, and airline tickets to lure international clients⁴.

Gheorghe et al. tried to find out, why patients from a restricted region travel to Germany for dental care. In five German dental clinics located in the border area between Switzerland and Germany, 272 women and 236 men ranging in age from 5 to 94 years, who had undergone at least one dental treatment in Germany, were questioned concerning the reasons for their visits. The interviews took place within a period of 6 months and relied on a questionnaire to collect data regarding sociodemographic features and patient behavior. In comparison to residents of Germany, patients residing in Switzerland took on considerably longer travel distances for the dental visit, in some cases more than 50 km (9.7%). For patients residing in Switzerland the technical equipment of the practice was more important, whereas for residents of Germany the cost-effective treatment was decisive. Almost all patients residing in Switzerland (95.6%) confirmed that dental treatments in Germany were cheaper and that additional family members also came to Germany for dental care (65.0%)⁵.

Jurišić & Cegur Radović have analyzed the competitive advantages (natural and qualified human resources, competitive prices and proximity to the large source markets) for dental tourism development in Croatia which are not yet sufficiently recognized or utilized. The above mentioned confirms the fact that nearly half of the surveyed clinics admit they don't have adequate knowledge on the development of dental tourism and a significantly low percentage of them are satisfied with the engagement of local public authorities in the sector of dental tourism and its development⁶.

³ Zoltan, J., & Maggi, R. (2010). What is tourism in dental tourism. *Faculty of Economics, University of Lugano, Switzerland*, https://ssl.lu.usi.ch/entityws/Allegati/pdf_pub5354.pdf [Accessed: 29.01.2024]

⁴ Kamath, K., Hugar, S., Kumar, V., Gokhale, N., Uppin, C., & Hugar, S. (2015). The business and pleasure of teeth: Dental tourism. *International Journal of Contemporary Dental & Medical Reviews, 2015*. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Niraj-Gokhale/publication/280135214_The_business_and_pleasure_of_teeth_Dental_tourism/links/55ac74d708aea9946727aa15/The-business-and-pleasure-of-teeth-Dental-tourism.pdf?_sg%5B0%5D=started_experiment_milestone&origin=journalDetail&_rtd=e30%3D [Accessed: 29.01.2024]

⁵ Gheorghe, R., Zürcher, A., & Filippi, A. (2017). Dental tourism from Switzerland to Germany. *Swiss Dent J*, 127(7-8), 618-33. https://andreas-filippi.ch/pdfs/fachartikel/swiss-dental-journal/21022017_Dental%20tourism%20from%20Switzerland%20to%20Germany.pdf [Accessed: 29.01.2024]

⁶ Jurišić, E., & Cegur Radović, T. (2017). Dental tourism—an opportunity for Croatian tourism. *Interdisciplinary Management Research XIII*, 297-311. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Zdravko-Sergo-2/publication/317258825_SHADOW_ECONOMY_AND_TOURISM_RECEIPTS_EVIDENCE_FROM_EUROPE/links/592e91800f7e9beee73cf754/SHADOW-ECONOMY-AND-TOURISM-RECEIPTS-EVIDENCE-FROM-EUROPE.pdf#page=298 [Accessed: 29.01.2024]

Oltean et al. used a representative sampling with an online questionnaire on 160 dental clinics and 32 tourism agencies in Romania. The results indicate that both entities have small amounts of information, but they are interested in investing, promoting, and creating a partnership to create a sustainable industry of dental tourism⁷.

Another study by Lwin et al. was done in Bangkok. A total of 106 respondents were involved in the study. Descriptive statistics, correlation and multiple linear regression analyses were performed to address the research objectives of the study. It was found that international patients are highly satisfied with their dental tourism experiences in Bangkok. In addition, the results showed that quality of dental treatment, location accessibility and destination appeal have a positive and significant influence on dental tourist satisfaction⁸.

METHODOLOGY. The main purpose of the study is to explore the issues and opportunities of dental tourism development in Armenia. The object of the research is tourism sphere in Armenia and the subject is dental tourism development issues.

The main methods used in the article are the following: desk review, SWOT analysis and interview.

Desk review was done for collecting and analyzing information from available secondary sources about the current state and development trends of dental tourism worldwide and in Armenia.

SWOT analysis was done to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of dental tourism development in Armenia. At first the internal strengths and weaknesses were identified and analyzed and then the external opportunities and threats that influence current and future development of the sphere.

An interview is a qualitative method, which is used to gather primary data. This method was applied to understand why tourists choose Armenia as a destination for dental tourism. The semi structured type of interview was applied. The number of interviewed people is 30. The respondents were chosen with the help of some dental clinics in Armenia. All respondents had used different dental services during 2023 and 2024 in Armenia.

The interview was done in January 15-February 10, 2024. The interview included open, closed and semi-open questions to understand the main motivation of tourists, their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with dental tourism in Armenia.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1. Dental tourism development trends in the world.

The global dental tourism market size was valued at USD 5.7 billion in 2022.

⁷ Oltean, F. D., Gabor, M. R., Stăncioiu, A. F., Kardos, M., Kiss, M., & Marinescu, R. C. (2020). Aspects of marketing in dental tourism—factor of sustainable development in Romania. *Sustainability*, 12(10), 4320. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12104320>

⁸ Lwin, H. N. N., Punnakitikashem, P., & Thananusak, T. (2021). The level and determinants of international patient satisfaction with dental tourism in Bangkok, Thailand. *Cogent business & management*, 8(1), 1898316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2021.1898316> [Accessed: 29.01.2024]

It is expected to reach USD 43.9 billion by 2030. The increasing prevalence of dental abnormalities and demand for aesthetic dentistry around the world are the main factors driving the industry's growth. Long waiting periods for dental care in the home country combined with lower treatment costs and superior services abroad are also anticipated to drive the industry expansion during the forecast period. The industry is growing due to promotional strategies including the start of web ads highlighting healthcare providers' affordable offerings. Consumer interest is sparked in adopting appealing medical-tourism packages by offering undivided attention to healthcare and providing reasonable lodging, recognizing both treatment and recreational options⁹.

Based on services, the dental implants segment held the largest revenue share of around 37% in 2022. On the basis of providers, the global industry has been further categorized into hospitals, dental clinics, and others. The dental clinics provider segment dominated the industry in 2022 and accounted for the maximum share of 48.6% of the overall revenue¹⁰.

Asia Pacific dominated the industry in 2022 and accounted for the largest revenue share of over 46% due to the robust dental care markets in India, Thailand, and Malaysia. The cost of treatment in countries, such as India, Brazil, and Thailand, is one-third that in the U.K. or the U.S., for instance, tooth extraction in the U.S. costs USD 300 per tooth without insurance for an average person, plus any additional work that needs to be done, whereas in France, the estimated cost is around USD 40 per tooth, which also covers the majority of extra necessary dental work¹¹.

The best dental tourism destinations in 2023 were: Serbia, Thailand, Mexico, Hungary, Spain, which offered a winning combination of superior dental care and unforgettable travel experiences¹².

2. Medical and dental tourism in Armenia.

Medical tourism in Armenia has opportunities for development. According to expert data, the most demanded options of medical tourism in Armenia are plastic surgery (especially of the nose), dental, gynecological, and trauma services. Moreover, the tourists are not only Armenians living abroad, but also foreigners from Europe, Iran and UAE.

Unfortunately, there is no exact statistics on medical tourists in Armenia. We have only the number of tourists who stayed in hotel facilities and in the purpose of travel there is an option of medical treatment which is very broad (it may include both medical care and spa-resort treatment). For example, in 2022, 1665658 incoming tourists visited Armenia, 645233 of which stayed at hotel facilities. 0.2%

⁹ Dental Tourism Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report By Service (Dental Implants, Orthodontics), By Provider (Hospitals, Dental Clinics), By Region (Europe, North America, Asia Pacific), And Segment Forecasts, 2023 – 2030, <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/dental-tourism-market-report> [Accessed: 29.01.2024]

¹⁰ Same place.

¹¹ Same place.

¹² **Perdub B.**, The Best Dental Tourism Destinations for 2023 & 2024, <https://marcodentaltourism.com/en/serbia/dental-tourism/best-destinations> [Accessed: 29.01.2024]

of them came for medical treatment¹³.

At the same time, the number of domestic tourists in hotel facilities was 1929940, and only 67298 of them travelled for medical treatment¹⁴.

Hospitals, clinics, dentals, spa-resorts also do not provide exact statistical data concerning the number of tourists and the main services which tourists have here.

It should be noted that the Ministry of Health of the RA also does not have data on the number of tourists arriving for medical purposes, what medical services they use, etc.

In 2013 as a result of the surveys conducted among the incoming and outgoing tourists at the RA border crossing points, it became clear that 8.47 percent of the 22,100 inbound tourists surveyed came for medical purposes, and tourists of Armenian origin who came for treatment were 11.92 percent¹⁵.

In 2021 the number of doctors in all specialties (including dentists) in the RA was 14548, of which 10767 were in Yerevan¹⁶.

According to expert data, medical tourists, who are mainly composed of representatives of the Armenian diaspora and Russians, usually come to Armenia for 10-15 days, most often for dental procedures and plastic surgery (65% of tourists come to Armenia for dental services). The recovery period usually lasts 7-8 days. After tourists receive their primary treatment, they usually travel around the country. Tourists who come for dental purposes, in particular, are considered full-fledged tourists, because after receiving treatment, they do not need further medical examination¹⁷.

Dental services are also affordable in Armenia compared to other countries. For example, according to Bookimed medical portal dental implantation costs 200-11475 USD in other countries, while in Armenia it is 349-1162 USD¹⁸.

3. Dental tourism development issues in Armenia.

As mentioned above, in January 15-February 10, 2024 an interview method was applied.

The number of interviewed people is 30, which are both representatives of Armenian diaspora (25 of them) and also foreigners (5 people).

The interviewers were mainly 25-55 years old, both male and female.

¹³ The socio-economic situation of the RA in January 2023, pp. 130-132, https://armstat.am/file/article/sv_01_23a_421.pdf [Accessed: 29.01.2024] (in Armenian)

¹⁴ The socio-economic situation of the RA in January 2023, p. 133, https://armstat.am/file/article/sv_01_23a_422.pdf [Accessed: 29.01.2024] (in Armenian)

¹⁵ Report on the results of a sample survey on international visits at the border crossing points of the Republic of Armenia in 2013, Yerevan 2014, pp. 23-27, <https://www.mineconomy.am/media/2076/1456.pdf> [Accessed: 29.01.2024] (in Armenian)

¹⁶ **Andreasyan D., Bazarchyan A., and others**, "Health and health care" statistical yearbook, Armenia 2022, Yerevan. "Academician S. Avdalbekyan National Institute of Health" CJSC, 2022, p. 256, <https://nih.am/assets/pdf/atvk/b82fc49555b30dc398d0570aedcf5421.pdf> [Accessed: 29.01.2024] (in Armenian)

¹⁷ **Tovmasyan G.**, (2021) Healthcare Tourism in Armenia: Opportunities and Perspectives of Development, Messenger of ASUE, 2021-5, pp. 107-126, DOI: 10.52174/1829-0280_2021_5_107

¹⁸ **Tovmasyan G.**, Spa-resort and medical tourism in the Republic of Armenia and the world. Monograph / G. R. Tovmasyan: Yer. Meknark LLC, 2024, pp. 228-229. ISBN 978-9939-0-4737-9 (in Armenian)

The main reasons for choosing Armenia as a dental tourism destination are: affordable prices, high professional dentists, developed technologies. According to tourists the prices in Armenia are from 2-3 times less than in Europe and USA.

Foreigners who came for dental services are Russian citizens. They highly evaluate the quality of services, also they have heard about the quality of services through word-of-mouth marketing.

Their satisfaction level was very high. The average score is 4.9 (range is 1-5).

The tourists had no dissatisfaction.

They had also some suggestions for dental tourism development regarding the marketing and promotion.

Besides the interview, SWOT analysis was done for dental tourism development in Armenia (table 1).

Table 1

SWOT analysis of dental tourism development

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Availability of highly qualified dentists	Lack of statistical recording	Improving statistical recording	Presence of well-known and highly popular dental tourism destinations in the international market
Affordable prices on dental services and an extensive list of dental services	Absence of medical tourism development program for Armenia	Development and implementation of medical tourism development strategy	Inadequately developed healthcare system compared to competing countries
Presence of Armenian diaspora	Lack of dental tourism marketing	Organization of online marketing campaigns	High prices of air tickets to the RA
Availability of resources for the organization of recreational tourism in the RA	Lack of a unified information and booking portal of dental services	Creation of a unified information and booking portal of dental services	Underdevelopment of infrastructures
Some citizens have medical insurance which covers also dental services	Armenia is not presented worldwide as a medical and dental tourism destination	Identification of target markets and target marketing for the development of dental tourism	Low income level of the RA population

Source: was developed as a result of the analysis made by the author.

Based on the analysis, the following steps must be done for dental tourism development in Armenia:

- Formulation and implementation of a dental tourism development plan in Armenia, which will include the current situation, analysis of problems and ways of improvement,
- Creation of a unified information and booking portal of dental services where tourists will see the dental clinics, their doctors, prices and services in one place,
- Improvement of statistical recording in order to have detailed information on the number of dental tourists, their country of origin, etc.,

- Marketing actions of dental tourism in Armenia, which will include the analysis of target markets and specific actions for each market for the distribution of Armenia's dental tourism opportunities,
- Presentation of Armenia's dental tourism opportunities in the official tourism website Armenia.travel,
- Improvement of the quality of services by evaluating the satisfaction of tourists with dental services and undertaking the necessary steps,
- Application to International accreditations and certifications, as many international tourists rely on certified services worldwide,
- Application for membership programs to many popular and reputable dental tourism associations worldwide,
- Modernization of dental technologies to ensure high-quality services,
- Collaboration with relevant travel agencies which will process and promote travel packages including dental services, transportation, accommodation, etc.

CONCLUSIONS, limitations and considerations for further studies

Thus, Armenia has high opportunities to become a dental tourism destination. Armenia offers low-cost and high-quality dental services compared to many other countries.

Not only Armenians living abroad, but also foreign tourists come to Armenia for dental services. After treatment, dental tourists may have pleasant time in Armenia, thus they may combine both treatment and leisure in one trip.

The study reveals some issues for dental tourism development in Armenia. The main recommendations were towards improving marketing, statistics, quality of services, developing programs, creating online med-portal of dental services, etc.

The study has also some limitations. At first, the interview among dental tourists included limited number of tourists because of the time frame. Also, there are no accurate data on the number of dental tourists, their origin. The details of interviewed people were found with the help of some dental clinics. The respondents were their clients, who agreed to participate in the interview. Future studies should include more tourists and should be done for a longer period of time. Besides, future studies should apply not only interviews, but also questionnaires and focus group surveys.

Future studies should also include interviews with dental clinics and tourism agencies to find out their point of view and their suggestions towards the main issues of dental tourism development and the main steps.

This was the first attempt to evaluate the opportunities of dental tourism in Armenia, and initially, taking into account the goals of the study, it was able to reveal some problems and find some solutions to them.

The study results may be useful for tourism organizations, dental clinics, Tourism Committee of the RA, etc.

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ԳԱՅԱՆԵ ԹՈՎՄԱՍՅԱՆ

ՀՊՏՀ «Ամբերդ» հեղափոխական կենտրոնի ավագ հեղափոխող, փնտեսագիտության թեկնածու, դոցենտ

Ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջության զարգացման հեռանկարները Հայաստանում.– Ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջությունը բժշկական զբոսաշրջության տեսակ է, երբ զբոսաշրջիկները մեկնում են արտերկիր՝ ստոմատոլոգիական ծառայություններ և բուժում ստանալու նպատակով: Ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջության նպատակն է ստանալ որակյալ բուժում ավելի մատչելի գնով և ժամանակակից տեխնոլոգիաների կիրառմամբ:

Ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջությունն աստիճանաբար ավելի տարածվում է հատկապես այն երկրների բնակչության շրջանում, որտեղ ատամնաբուժական ծառայությունների արժեքը բարձր է, կամ դրանց հասանելիությունը սահմանափակ է:

Հայաստանն ունի ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջության զարգացման մեծ հնարավորություններ: Ատամնաբուժական ծառայությունների համար Հայաստան են գալիս բազմաթիվ զբոսաշրջիկներ: Հոդվածում օգտագործված հիմնական մեթոդներն են փաստաթղթերի վերլուծությունը, հարցազրույցը և SWOT վերլուծությունը: Ըստ ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջիկների շրջանում անցկացված հարցազրույցի արդյունքների՝ Հայաստանն ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջության համար նախընտրելի վայր է. դրա հիմքում մատչելի գներն ու բարձր-

րակ ծառայություններն են: Հոդվածում ներկայացված են Հայաստանում ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջության խթանման հիմնական խնդիրներն ու հեռանկարները: Որոշ առաջարկություններ են արվել մարքեթինգի, վիճակագրական հաշվառման, ծառայությունների որակի բարելավման, զարգացման ծրագրերի մշակման, ատամնաբուժական ծառայությունների առցանց հարթակի ստեղծման, միջազգային հավատարմագրերի և հավաստագրերի դիմելու և այլնի ուղղությամբ:

Հիմնաբառեր. ատամնաբուժական զբոսաշրջություն, ատամնաբուժություն, իմպլանտացիա, մարքեթինգ, բժշկական հարթակ, հավատարմագրում և սերտիֆիկացում

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ГАЯНЕ ТОВМАСЯН

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Перспективы развития стоматологического туризма в Армении. – Стоматологический туризм – это вид медицинского туризма, когда пациенты выезжают за границу для получения стоматологических услуг и лечения. Цель стоматологического туризма – получить качественную стоматологическую помощь по более доступной цене и с использованием более современных технологий.

Стоматологический туризм становится все более популярным, особенно среди населения стран, где стоимость стоматологических услуг высока или их доступность ограничена.

Армения имеет большие возможности для развития стоматологического туризма. Многие туристы приезжают в Армению за услугами стоматологии. Основными методами, использованными в статье, являются: анализ документов, интервью и SWOT-анализ. По результатам интервью стоматологических туристов, Армения является предпочтительным местом для стоматологического туризма благодаря доступным ценам и высокому качеству услуг. В статье исследуются основные проблемы и перспективы развития стоматологического туризма в Армении. Были даны рекомендации по улучшению маркетинга, статистического учета, качества услуг, переработки программ развития, созданию онлайн-медицинского портала стоматологических услуг, подаче заявок на международные аккредитации и сертификации и т.д.

Ключевые слова: стоматологический туризм, стоматология, имплантация, маркетинг, мед-портал, аккредитация и сертификация

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