

## **TRAVELING FOR MEDICAL TOURISM – THE DIASPORA’S MOTIVATION**

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### **Abstract**

*Medical tourism, considered the newest phenomena but, as well, an old activity of travelling on health purposes, is increasingly more often the subject of articles, seminars or conferences. Considering the factors that determine the motivation for medical tourism (investments in the health system infrastructure, the international certification and accreditation for medical services and suppliers, lower costs or better quality of medical procedures, political and social stability, excellent tourism infrastructure, good reputation regarding clinical excellence, implementation of the newest medical technologies, highly educated medical personnel, the insurance policies portability) and taking into account the conclusions of previous exploratory researches in health behavior, one of the possible segments of medical tourists is Diaspora. This paper highlights the decision process and preferences of tourists from Diasporas related to medical tourism in Romania. It uses data from a pilot survey that emphasis the medical travel motivations of Romanian patients resident in EU, Canada and USA. The first determinant is the cost, but there are several other motivations driving the decision to choose Romania as a medical tourism destination, such as confidence or cultural affinity.*

### **Keywords**

Medical tourism, Tourism, Health, Travel.

### **JEL Classification**

I150, Z300, Z320

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### **Introduction**

Medical tourism is a branch of the health and tourism industry contributing to maintaining and recovering health in general and wellness in particular, using authorized medical services (9<sup>th</sup> National Health Conference - Rostock/Germany, 2013). Tourists travel for medical services, such as: plastic surgery, treatments for fertility, bariatric surgery, dentistry, organ transplant, eye surgery, orthopedics, cancer treatments, etc., considering the low costs of medical services, the availability of procedures, the new technology, waiting lists or the coverage of medical health insurance. Other factors like cultural affinity, geographical proximity or willingness to travel are also an important impact in the decisions of travelling for medical purposes. Purchasing international medical services is the main objective of medical travelers, but for the last years they have started to be combined with touristic service packages, air transportation and transfers services (including transfers from the hotel to the clinic), accommodation and food services, local trips.

### **1 Literature review**

Smith and Puczko (2014) define medical tourism as a trip outside a person’s place of residence for the purpose of receiving medical treatment, investigation or therapy, the tourists making use of the destination’s infrastructure, attractions and facilities. Medical tourism is as well ”a niche emerged from the rapid growth of what has become an industry, where people travel often long distances to overseas countries to obtain medical, dental and surgical care while simultaneously being holidaymakers” (Connel, cited in Fetscherin and Stephano 2016) and ”involves not only going overseas for medical treatment, but also the search for destinations that have the most technical proficiency and which provide it at the most competitive prices [ ... ] combination of medical services and the tourism industry.” (Yu and Ko cited in Fetscherin and Stephano 2016). Bookman and Bookman (2007) emphasize the role of the medicine sector in medical tourism. Medical tourism is not just a journey to improve health, but an economic activity implying service trade, representing a merge of at least two economic sectors: tourism and medicine.

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## 2 Research Methodology

To appreciate the preferences and election of Diaspora's tourists for Romanian medical tourism, a pilot survey was initiated for 25 medical tourists. We used an exploratory survey considering the lack of knowledge about the medical tourism field, primarily in Romania. Using a pilot survey to a smaller group, the researchers may determine the best group size for the next main survey, or test the accuracy of the instructions.

The survey instrument was designed to collect information about the motivations and factors for travel planning in Romania, what medical procedures are sought or if the medical trip is combined with a vacation or a city break. The respondents were given the occasion to rank the importance of the factors that might influence their medical travel. First, we have interviewed a couple of Romanians from Canada, beneficiary of medical services provided by a private hospital from Bucharest. The interview was conducted to design questions included later on in a questionnaire used in the pilot survey.

A call for participation in the study was sent online, by email and via social network, using addresses received from known contacts between December 2016 and March 2017. All the respondents are Romanians living in Diaspora, residents in USA, Canada, EU and UK, who already experienced the travel for medical purposes in Romania. They are all aged between 30 and 50 years old, employed, with higher education. The survey was promoted online by email, social network and on the expat forums as well. The respondent's Internet Protocol (IP) address was known, but we did not explore the personal information of the respondent and we assured confidentiality in data collection. Given the ease sampling procedure, it is impossible to determine the randomness of the data. Therefore, the results are simply provided as an exploration of the travel behavior of Romanian Diaspora medical tourists.

## 3 Results and discussion

We analyzed the entire group of respondents but, to understand the differences of behavior due to the geographical aspect, we proceeded to difference the North America's ethnic Romanian respondents from the others representing EU and UK citizens.

**Table 1. Factors of choice of medical services**

The reason for medical tourism in Romania	Rank provided / score awarded					TOTAL	average appreciation
	I	II	III	IV	V		
	5	4	3	2	1		
medical service price	11	2	2	1	4	20	3.75
	55.00%	10.00%	10.00%	5.00%	20.00%		
promptitude (reduced waiting time)	6	4	3	6	2	21.00	3.29
	28.57%	19.05%	14.29%	28.57%	9.52%		
safety (hospital conditions, relationship with medical staff)	0	2	6	6	4	18.00	2.33
	0.00%	11.11%	33.33%	33.33%	22.22%		
competence of doctors	5	9	5	2	1	22.00	3.68
	22.73%	40.91%	22.73%	9.09%	4.55%		
clinic awareness	1	5	5	6	7	24.00	2.46
	4.17%	20.83%	20.83%	25.00%	29.17%		

Source: Designed by the author, based on the own research

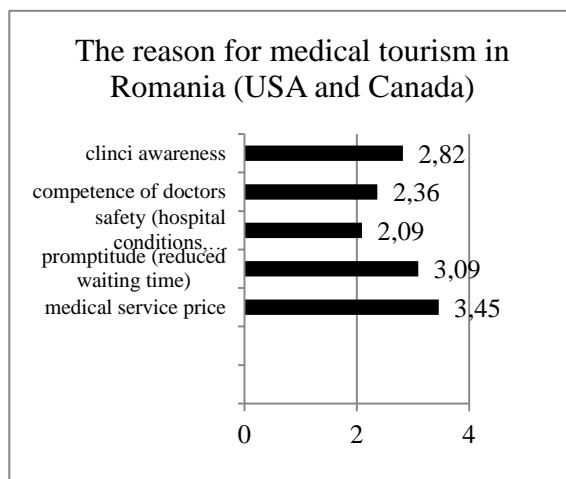
At the first question, concerning the important factor for choosing Romania for medical services "Please indicate in order of importance (1 most important ... 5 least important) why chose Romania for medical services", the answers indicate the "medical service price" to be the most important, and the "safety" as the least important.

The answer corresponds to the international factors which determine the motivation for medical tourism. The promptitude of medical service is also a factor mentioned in studies on medical tourism trends, and indicates that the Romanian medical tourism offer is integrated in the international tendencies. The competence of doctors and the clinic awareness are important factors considering the migration of medical staff registered in the last decade, but the new private investments in the medical area increased the reliability in the Romanian medical field.



**Figure no. 1: Graphic for factors of choice of medical services**

*Source: The author's own design*



**Figure no. 2: Graphic for factors of choice of medical services for North Americans**

*Source: The author's own design*

Regarding the category of medical services chosen (table no. 2 and figure no.3), 24 answered and one skipped. In this category, the most required are dental services and medical investigations, while the ophthalmic surgery is not a procedure requested at all.

**Table 2. The type of medical services chosen**

The type of medical service chosen	Answers	%
bariatric surgery	3	12.50%
dental services	16	66.67%
Ophthalmic surgery	0	0.00%
medical investigations	11	45.83%
a second opinion	3	12.50%
cosmetic surgery	1	4.17%
spa treatment	2	8.33%
others	3	12.50%

*Source: Designed by the author, based on the own research*

The North Americans respondents did not mention cosmetic or ophthalmic surgery or spa treatment, but they are attracted by dental services and bariatric surgery (Figure no. 4).

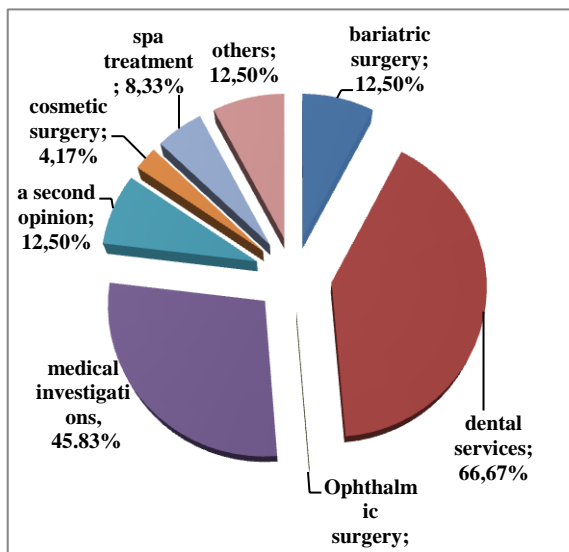


Figure no. 3: Type of medical service chosen

Source: The author's own design

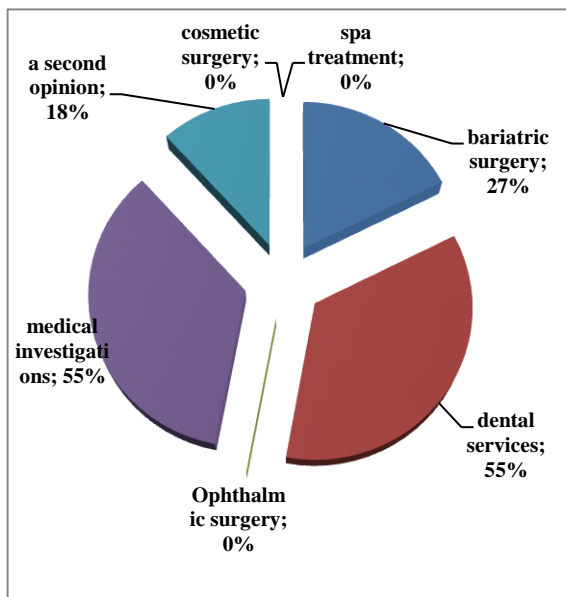


Figure no. 4: Type of medical service chosen by North Americans

Source: The author's own design

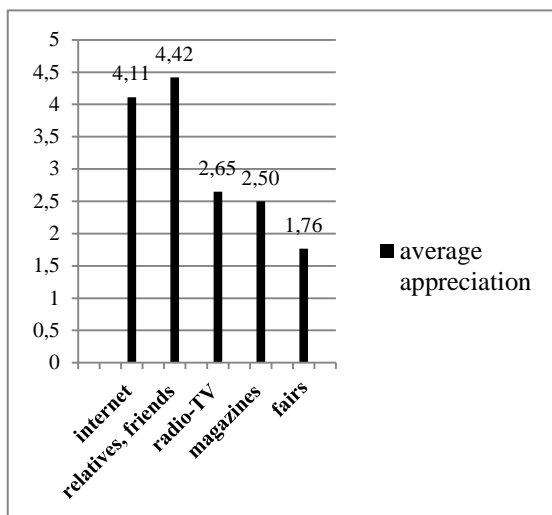
Considering the source of information concerning the decision to travel in Romania for medical services, relatives and friends are the best source, the Internet being the second one. The other sources do not have a significant influence (table 3).

Table 3. Source of information

source of informations	Rank provided / score awarded					TOTAL	average appreciation
	I	II	III	IV	V		
	5	4	3	2	1		
internet	6	10	1	0	1	18	4.11
	33.33%	55.56%	5.56%	0.00%	5.56%		
relatives, friends	16	5	1	1	1	24	4.42
	66.67%	20.83%	4.17%	4.17%	4.17%		
radio-TV	1	2	7	4	3	17	2.65
	5.88%	11.76%	41.18%	23.53%	17.65%		
magazines	0	1	7	7	1	16	2.50
	0.00%	6.25%	43.75%	43.75%	6.25%		
fairs	2	1	0	2	12	17	1.76
	11.76%	5.88%	0.00%	11.76%	70.59%		

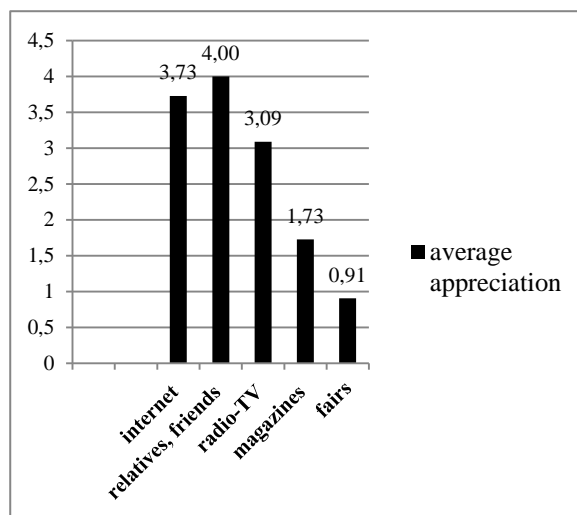
Source: Designed by the author, based on the own research

North Americans (Figure nr. 6) registered a good score for relatives and friends, same as the general answer (Figure no. 5), but there is a difference considering the radio – TV, where the average appreciation is above the general score.



**Figure no. 5: Graphic of source of information**

Source: The author's own design



**Figure no. 6: Graphic of source of information (North Americans)**

Source: The author's own design

Travel arrangements on health services were accomplished by the tourists themselves, and no one mentioned a travel agency or a medical tourism facilitator as intermediary of the travel.

The total period spent in Romania, including days of hospitalization, was in 88% of the cases used to visit relatives and friends, while one respondent indicated spending a holiday in a tourist destination, another one in a city break, while another respondent used the time strictly for medical purpose.

**Table 4. Using of time spent in Romania**

Answer choises	Responses	%
visits to relatives, friends	22	88.00%
spending holiday in a tourist destination	1	4.00%
city break	1	4.00%
period was used strictly for medical purposes	1	4.00%
others	0	0.00%
TOTAL	25	100.00%

Source: Designed by the author, based on the own research

For the group of North America, the time spent in Romania was integrally used to visit relatives and friends, and no one spent the holiday in a tourist destination or a city break.

The total period spent in Romania, including days of hospitalization, was less than 7 days - considering the majority of respondents (44%), while a similar groups of respondents declared a stay of over 11 days.

**Table 5. The time spent in Romania**

Answer choises	Responses	%
under 7 days	11	44.00%
7-10 days	2	8.00%
11-15 days	6	24.00%
over 15 days	6	24.00%
Total	25	100.00%

Source: Designed by the author, based on the own research

For the Americans, the total period spent in Romania, including days of hospitalization, was mostly between 11 and 15 days (45%) and over 15 days (27%), this tendency being linked to the big distance from the residence country.

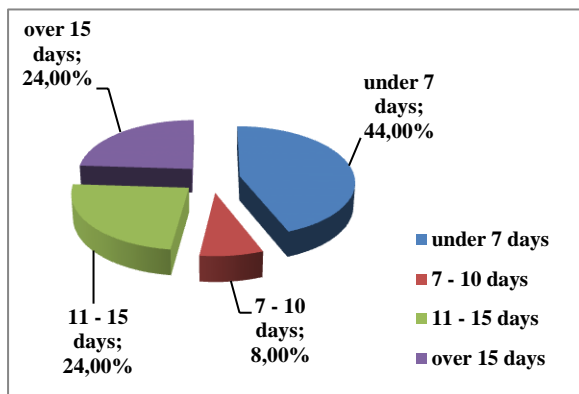


Figure no. 7: The time spent in Romania

Source: The author's own design

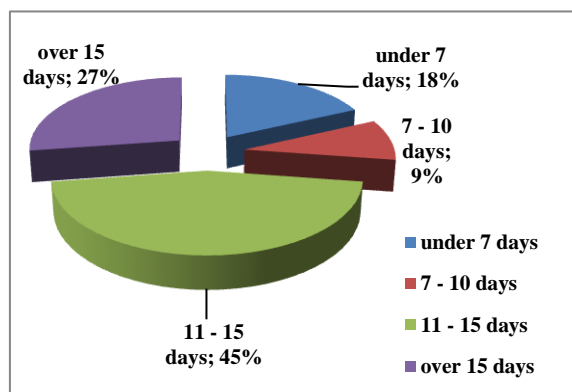


Figure no. 8: The time spent in Romania (North Americans)

Source: The author's own design

The accommodation during the stay (except hospitalization) was provided in 80% of the cases by relatives and friends, in 16% of the cases by hotels and one respondent declared other forms of lodging (his own house) (table no. 6).

Table 6. Accommodation provider

Type of accommodation	Responses	%
hotel	4	16.00%
relatives, friends	20	80.00%
hotel partner of hospital	0	0.00%
others	1	4.00%
TOTAL	25	100.00%

Source: Designed by the author, based on the own research

The accommodation of tourists from North America (Figure no. 10) was provided in 91% of the cases by relatives and friends and in 9% of the cases by other provider (the own house).

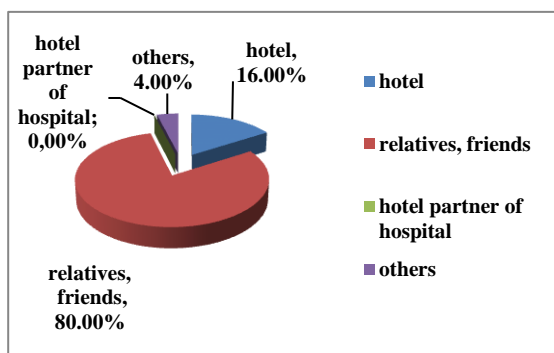


Figure no. 9: Graphic of accommodation providers

Source: The author's own design

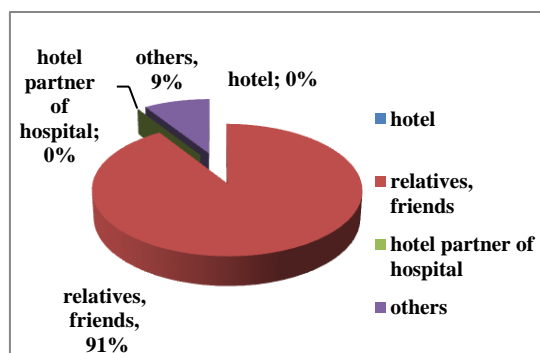


Figure no. 10: Graphic of accommodation providers (North Americans)

Source: The author's own design

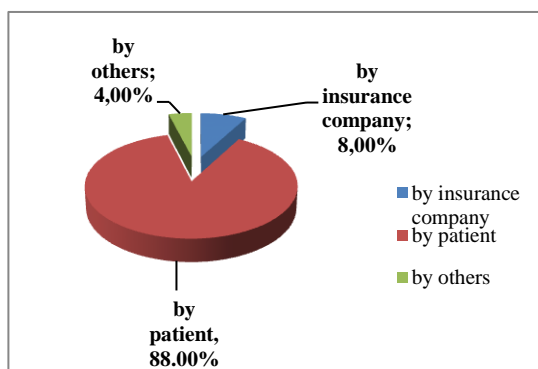
The recovery after a surgical intervention or the lodging needed between dental therapies is not yet taken into consideration by the hotels or other accredited accommodation structures. A certification for a medical tourism accommodation structure could be a good answer to the request of this tourism niche and could help hotels to increase their business.

**Table 7. Medical costs coverage**

Answer choices	Responses	%
by insurance company	2	8.00%
by patient	22	88.00%
by others	1	4.00%
TOTAL	25	100.00%

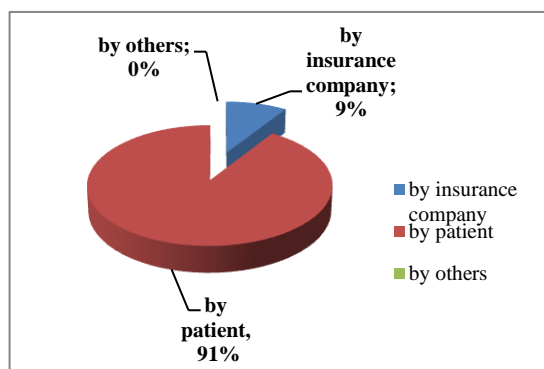
Source: Designed by the author, based on the own research

Medical services costs (table no. 7 and Figure no 11) were supported in 88% of the cases by the patient, in 8% of the cases by the insurance company and 1% of the cases by others, while 91% of the North American patients sustained the costs and the rest of 9% were sustained by the insurance company (Figure no. 12).



**Figure no. 11: Graphic for medical costs coverage**

Source: The author's own design



**Figure no. 12: Graphic for medical costs coverage (North Americans)**

Source: The author's own design

The large coverage of costs by patient explain the first motivation indicated in the opening of survey (table and Figure no 1) as being the cost of medical services. The insurance company has a minimum role in our small group of respondents, but there is a trend in order to reduce costs, to use the portability of the insurance policy and to access international medical service.

**Conclusions**

Medical tourism is a development opportunity for Romania, considering the progress of the private medical services and taking into account the favorable international context.

Regarding the travel motivation for medical tourism, we found that the Diasporas could be a good segment interested in purchasing Romanian medical tourism services. They are motivated by the reduced costs, the doctors' competence, the promptitude of the medical service and the clinic awareness. The safety of the service is not a motivating factor, this aspect needing to be improved. The motivation of Diaspora from Europe could differ from that of North America, considering the category of medical services chosen and the time spent in Romania. The most required medical services are dentals and medical investigations, the spa treatment and cosmetic surgery being selected by the segment from Europe, the ophthalmic surgery not being a procedure requested yet.

Trends in medical tourism are involving as well a combination of activities of tourism industry: travel, hospitality, entertainment, nutrition, cultural and social tours. In our survey we found that accommodation was mostly supplied by relatives and friends, the touristic activities having a low representation. These aspects could be in the future attention of the entities of hospitality and tourism field in thought to adapt their offers to the requirements of medical tourists.

The insurance companies could increase their position in the future, considering the importance of medical insurance policy and the permanent attention for reducing costs. In the meantime, for Europe, the Directive 2011/24/EU on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare could attract, for countries as Romania, many medical tourist seeking shorter waiting lists or better costs.

Future research could focus on analyzing the demand for medical tourism in Romania, in order to invest in creating and promoting a competitive medical touristic offer.

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