



### HEALTH TOURISM AND AN EXAMPLE OF PRIVATE HEALTHCARE SOLUTION

Haluk ÖZSARI<sup>1\*</sup>, Mehmet ŞEKER<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup> M.S., PhD., Associate Professor, Health Management Department, Health Sciences Faculty, Acibadem Mehmet Ali Aydınlar University

<sup>2</sup>B.A., Research Assistant, Health Management Department, Health Sciences Faculty, Acibadem Mehmet Ali Aydınlar University

\*E-mail: [haluk.ozsari@acibadem.edu.tr](mailto:haluk.ozsari@acibadem.edu.tr)

**Abstract:** Turkey has been one of the popular destinations in world in terms of tourism. Its geographical position, climate and natural resources made it a plausible destination for tourism for several decades. Turkish health care sector attracts international patients both to private and public health facilities. Between 2008 and 2014, roughly 75 % of the patients preferred private hospitals in Turkey. After 2014, there is a decline in total number of international patients in the following years and the percentages of the private institutions starts to decline as well. As of today, Turkey has 46 JCI (Joint Commission International) accredited hospitals and healthcare facilities, making it one of the leading countries in medical tourism. US citizens, by receiving treatment in Turkey can save up to 65 % of their medical costs. Turkish Government has declared in its 10th Development Plan that Turkey targets to have USD 20 billion income from health tourism by 2023, of which USD 5,6 billion will generated by only medical tourism. One of the private healthcare groups in Turkey, Acibadem Health Group, has implemented an international patient oriented application which helps them to get the best care in Turkey, which is called “Acibadem Health Point”, which helps international patients in every possible step of international healthcare tourism. Acibadem Health Group has regional representative offices in more than 30 countries to provide patients with information about local hospitals, doctors etc., and organizes their visit to their healthcare facilities. They host almost 30 thousand patients, annually from 5 continents and 47 different countries in 90 different branches and their International Patient Center staffed by a team of 150, providing comprehensive 360 degrees of healthcare services, from scheduling patients treatment at Acibadem before arrival to assisting their travel back home. Sustainable quality approach is indispensable concept in health tourism. We also must rapidly increase the number of best practices in our country such as “health point”. As the level of international healthcare standard increases, the level of satisfaction of foreign patients and user loyalty will also increase. We should never forget that as a health manager.

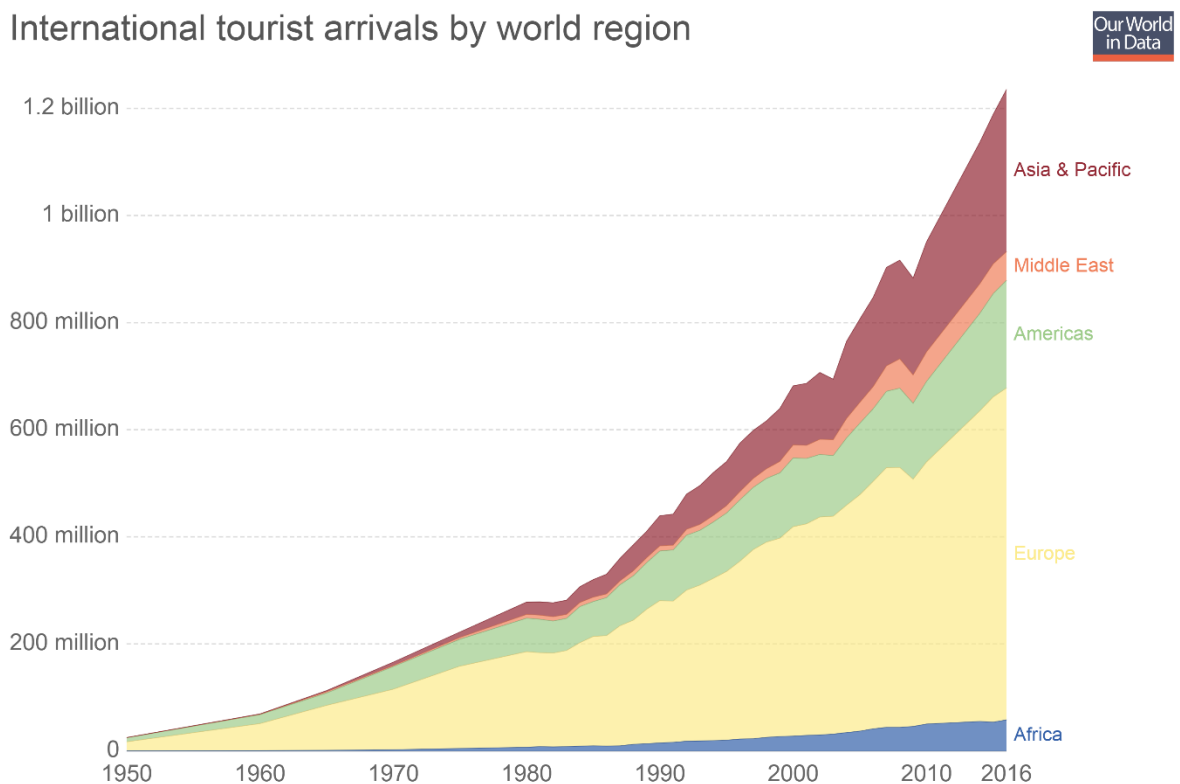
## Introduction

Medical tourism, along with the health tourism which encompasses a broader definition, increases its importance as the transportation and healthcare opportunities improves and proliferates. With the help of bilateral agreements between countries in scopes of health insurances and improved ways of patient transportation increased the total number of patients who received various treatments abroad. We can easily add the effect of developed technologies like mobile devices and online applications which help monitoring the condition of patient, directing patient accordingly, if necessary, informing the physician etc. Turkey is a prominent country in medical tourism with its geographical advantages, technological and humanitarian potential. In this paper, we are presenting the global extent of the medical tourism, along with the health tourism, focusing particularly on Turkey and its prospective position among the similar countries and providing an example from the health industry in Turkey in the context of both utilization of mobile technologies and complete health service.

## Tourism, Data on Worldwide Tourism and Health / Medical Tourism

International tourism, in the broadest term, is defined by AIEST (Association Internationale D'Experts Scientifiques Du Tourisme) as tourists' total activities, with the condition that they do not intend to become permanent residents in the foreign country for any purpose of financial benefit (Özsari, 2013). Tourism has been one of the major industries for countries for generating income. Beginning from the ancient times, humans travelled around the world for various reasons, like trade, cultural activities, recreational reasons etc. Especially the last decades have witnessed an unprecedented increase in tourist numbers. Table 1 shows the increase of global tourism in last 7 decades (Roser, 2018).

### International tourist arrivals by world region



Among the many reasons for engaging in touristic activities, health and medical reasons are becoming more and more significant. Even if they seemed to be having similar meanings or closely related, there are fundamental differences what they describe. Medical tourism can be defined as the type of tourism where patients travel abroad to seek for a non-emergent medical treatment (Adams, 2017), whereas health tourism, which is also named as wellness tourism and both are used interchangeably, can be defined as all of the activities of tourists, outside their local environments, to improve their state of physical and mental health and well-being. (Lunt, 2011) In accordance with this massive increase in global tourism, health and medical tourism has become a great industry worldwide. As of 2017, it is estimated that the market size has reached USD 45.5 – 72 billion, with estimated 14 – 16 million international medical tourists individually spending an average of USD 3,800-6,000 for every travel (Patients Beyond Borders, 2017).

### Tourism and Health/Medical Tourism in Turkey

Turkey has been one of the popular destinations in world in terms of tourism. Its geographical position, climate and natural resources made it a plausible destination for tourism for several decades. As health and medical tourism emerges as a major cause of touristic activities, Turkey is redirecting its resources and potential towards medical and health tourism in order to remain a tourist attraction in all areas of tourism. The following table shows total number of tourists in recent years and of them, number of tourists who has health or medical reasons for their purpose of visit. Data in table is collected by survey from departing foreigners as well as citizens living abroad. As the Table 2 shows, Turkey experienced a steady upward trend in number of tourists visiting Turkey in recent years (TUIK, 2018).

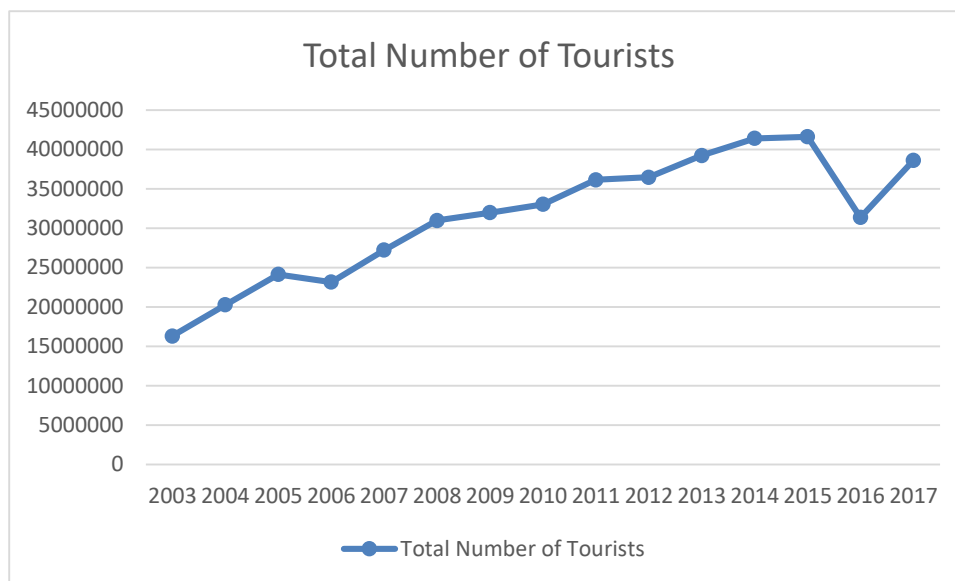


Table 2.a: Total Number of Tourists visiting Turkey.

Source: TUIK

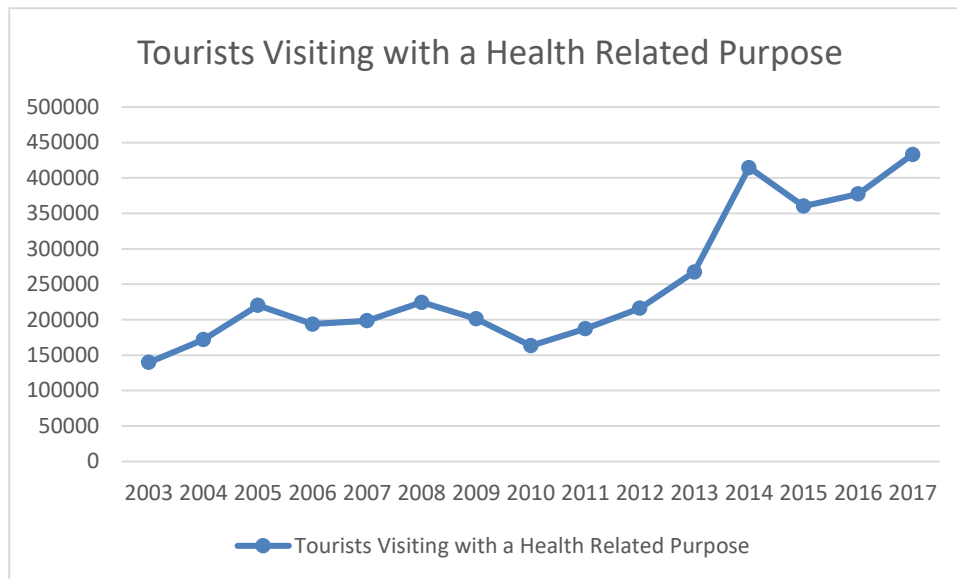
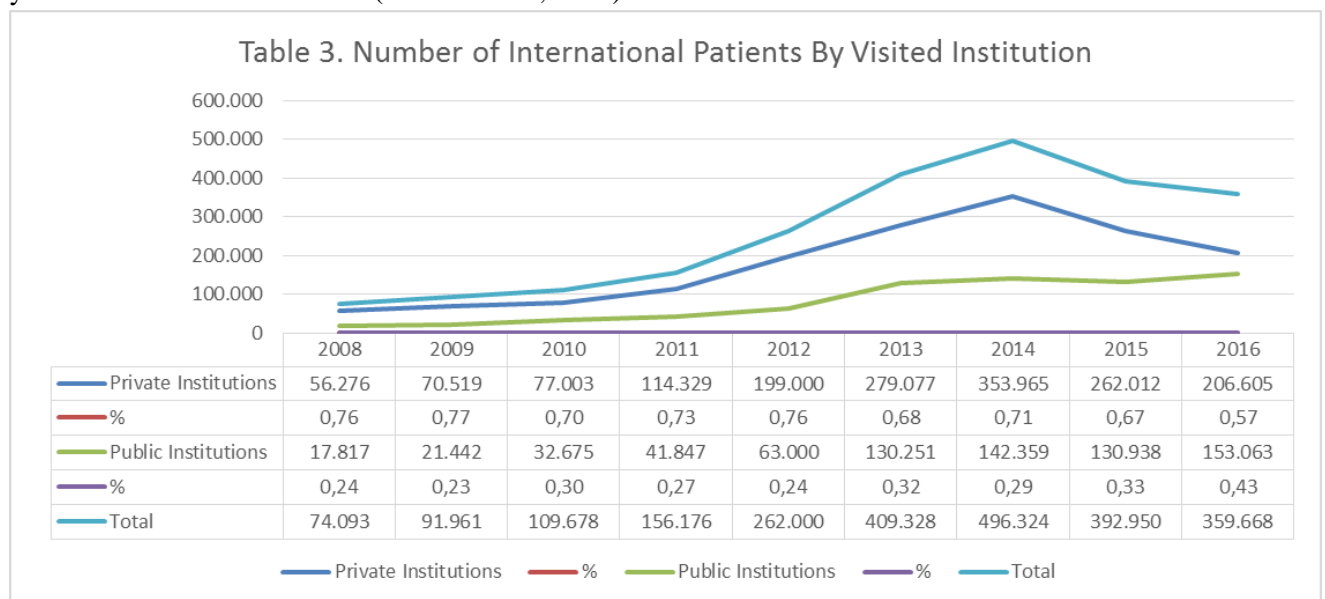


Table 2.b: Tourists Visiting Turkey with a Health Related Purpose. Source: TUIK

Turkish health care sector attracts international patients both to private and public health facilities. Following Table 3 demonstrates the number of patients who visited public or private hospitals for the years between 2008 and 2016. (Omer Tontus, 2018)



As seen in the table, between 2008 and 2014, roughly 75% of the patients preferred private hospitals in Turkey. After 2014, there is a decline in total number of international patients in the following years and the percentages of the private institutions starts to decline as well. Also the real numbers are expected to be higher because there may be some smaller institutions which may not keep the records of international patients accordingly.

At this point, it is important to emphasize some the factors which gives Turkish private health care sector a comparative advantage. A study by Northwestern University noted that state-of-the-art technology and infrastructure, top quality services, competitive prices, ease in access to medical services are key factors of Turkey for being preferred by international patients. (DEİK, 2017)

Because of the unfavorable healthcare sector conditions in neighboring and near countries, Turkey becomes a viable option. Even for distant countries, for example in USA, costs of various medical procedures can be relatively expensive, and relatively cheaper costs in Turkey poses a good alternative and the quality of the healthcare in Turkey is a decisive factor. In cases where individuals do not have health insurance, have to make out-of-pocket payments or have to wait long until their treatment date, cheaper and quicker treatment solutions can be both important and affordable. As of today, Turkey has 46 JCI (Joint Commission International) accredited hospitals and healthcare facilities, making it one of the leading countries in medical tourism (JCI, 2018). US citizens, by receiving treatment in Turkey can save up to %65 of their medical costs. (Patients Beyond Borders, 2017).

### **Opportunities for Turkey**

Turkish Government has declared in its 10<sup>th</sup> Development Plan that Turkey targets to have USD 20 billion income from health tourism by 2023, of which USD 5,6 billion will generated by only medical tourism. (Ministry of Development, 2013). To reach this, Turkey should focus on the following issues:

- Under public guidance, private sector and university partnerships, publicity and marketing efforts should be increased,
- Tourism and Health Ministries and universities and private health institutions should be coordinated,
- The introduction of the cost and quality of service should be done better,
- The importance on high technology and quality care by patients should be well assessed,
- Hair planting and aesthetic services should be utilized at the highest level,
- The processes related to the intermediary institutions which brings patients should be well defined.

### **An Example of Private Healthcare Solution**

One of the private healthcare groups in Turkey, Acibadem Health Group, has implemented an international patient oriented application which helps them to get the best care in Turkey, which is called “Acibadem Health Point”, which helps international patients in every possible step of international healthcare tourism. Health Point application has started in November 2015 in Acibadem Health Group. Agreements were made with 13 hospitals located in Balkans, Middle Asia, and Middle East, and Health Point offices were opened within these hospitals. “It has regional representative offices in more than 30 countries to provide patients with information about local hospitals, doctors etc., and organizes their visit to their healthcare facilities. Acibadem Health Group host almost 30 thousand patients, annually from 5 continents and 47 different countries in 90 different branches. Acibadem International Patient Center staffed by a team of 150, providing comprehensive 360 degrees of healthcare services, from scheduling patients treatment at Acibadem before arrival to assisting their travel back home”. Acibadem International Patient Center gets bilateral agreements with the neighboring countries’ Health Ministries and social security funds to provide various treatments for different patients. Being equipped with state-of-the-art technology, hospitals can provide complex surgical treatments and treatments requiring multidisciplinary approach. Patients are led through the following steps, from the beginning of the process in their homeland and back.

“... ”

- Application: By sending an e-mail, calling, or through web page, patients easily apply for medical consultancy.

- Consultation: Patient's medical history files are evaluated and patients are contacted with the recommended course of treatment.
- Planning: A dedicated team of professionals schedules the patient's healthcare journey according to their needs and expectations.
- Hospitality: A representative accompanies the patient through every medical transfer.
- Treatment: An expert team, with the help of the most advanced medical technology, provides the treatment.
- Follow-up Care: A representative checks the patient's medical condition after the treatment process is completed.

...”

## Conclusion

The tourism sector is expanding rapidly and health tourism is benefiting from the fruits of this expansion. Particularly, Turkey has great potential in tourism and this potential should be channeled into health tourism, quality level of it should be improved by both public and private institutions. As it is emphasized by Meri İstiroti in May 4, 2018, sustainable quality approach is indispensable concept in health tourism. With the opportunities mentioned above, we should rapidly increase the number of good practices in our country such as “health point”. As the level of international healthcare standard increases, the level of satisfaction of foreign patients and user loyalty will also increase. We should never forget that as a health manager. In this context, the health insurance companies and out of pocket health expenditures procedures should not be forgotten for reimbursement policy.

## References

- Adams, K., Snyder, J., Crooks, V. A., & Johnston, R. (2017). Developing an informational tool for ethical engagement in medical tourism. *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*, 12(1), 4.
- DEİK. (2017) “IFC-Focus”. Retrieved from: <https://www.deik.org.tr/uploads/ifc-focus.pdf> (last access: 20.06.2018)
- JCI (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.jointcommissioninternational.org/about-jci/jci-accredited-organizations> (last access: 14.06.2018)
- Lunt, N., Smith, R., & Exworthy, M. (2011). *Medical Tourism: Treatments, Markets and Health System Implications: A Scoping Review*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Ministry of Development. (2013) “10<sup>th</sup> Development Plan” Retrieved from: [http://www.kalkinma.gov.tr/Lists/Kalkinma%20Planlar/Attachments/12/Onuncu\\_Kalk%C4%B1nma\\_Plan%C4%B1.pdf](http://www.kalkinma.gov.tr/Lists/Kalkinma%20Planlar/Attachments/12/Onuncu_Kalk%C4%B1nma_Plan%C4%B1.pdf) (last access: 11.06.2018)
- Omer Tontus, H., & Nebioglu, S. (2018). Turkey as a Health Tourism Destination: Reviewing of 2015-2016 Data. *J Tourism Hospit*, 7(336), 2167-0269.
- ÖZSARI, S. H., & Karatana, Ö. (2013). Sağlık Turizmi Açısından Türkiye'nin Durumu. *Journal Of Kartal Training & Research Hospital/Kartal Eğitim Ve Arastırma Hastanesi Tıp Dergisi*, 24(2).
- Patients Beyond Borders (2017). Retrieved from: <https://patientsbeyondborders.com/medical-tourism-statistics-facts> (last access: 21.06.2018)
- Roser, M. (2018). "Tourism". Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/tourism> (last access: 21.06.2018)
- TUIK (2018). Retrieved from: [http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreIstatistikTablo.do?istab\\_id=324](http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreIstatistikTablo.do?istab_id=324) (last access: 04.06.2018)

<http://www.acibadem.com/online-prints/acibadem-hospitals-group-excellence-in-healthcare/files/assets/basic-html/page-1.html> (last access: 01.06.2018)