

Public Administration of Health Tourism, on the Rise in Istanbul

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: The Ministry of Health of the Republic of Turkey inaugurated the first formal structure in Health Tourism in 2010 for medical tourists and leisure travelers. Health Tourism presents opportunities for regional development. **METHODS:** The article elaborates on the role of local government in Istanbul, a city praised for clinical excellence, for its internationally-accredited institutions, cutting-edge medical technologies, geographic convenience, and for affordable prices. Public officials at the Health Directorate launched their first website in English in 2015. Foreign language trainings, local and international meeting participations, data management and information sharing, in conjunction with promotional activities serve to boost Health Tourism in the city. The applicability of the Turkish model presents a design for other countries. The importance of data governance is emphasized by the authorities. Istanbul Health Tourism Working Group Meetings was initiated in 2015 to facilitate collaborations. **RESULTS:** Within the last decade, Turkey achieved significant momentum, from 74,093 international patients of Health Tourism in 2008 to nearly 500,000 in 2018. Istanbul ranks first in the country. The city hosted between 2015 and 2016, more international patients than all other cities combined. The increase from 36,578 patients in 2008 was nearly fivefold to 177,314 in 2015, and to 157,975 in 2016. **DISCUSSION:** Effective branding strategies are to be launched soon, with intentions to contribute to the country's reputation in medical practices and health care service delivery. Istanbul is ascending in global order with the ultimate goal of regional leadership. **CONCLUSION:** Envisioning the future, service providers and policy makers are urged to sustain and improve quality standards in international health care, be up-to-date on international health policies and patient safety issues, place more emphasis on research, facilitate public-private partnerships and international collaborations, motivate the HT workforce. For more recognition, an informed and adaptable attitude with a universal mind-set is necessary.

Keywords

International Health Services, Health Care Management, Health Policy, Governance, Foreign Patients, Ministry of Health, Health Economics

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1. Introduction

Based on years of experience in international health services, the Republic of Turkey (TR) Ministry of Health (MoH)

inaugurated the first formal structure in Health Tourism (HT) in 2010, with the aim of establishing a principal point of oversight for monitoring and evaluating progress. The Department of HT functions under the General Directorate (GD) of Health Promotion at TR MoH [1]. From an

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organizational perspective, are considered HT to be a part of “specialized care services” by TR MoH’s GD of Public Hospitals and TUSEB Health Institutes of Turkey [2, 3]. The HT Unit, authorized to monitor and supervise international health care provision throughout the city, was initially established under the Department of Private Inpatient Health Services at TR MoH Health Directorate of Istanbul (HDI). Through this specialized unit of public administration, public and private health care services are governed and regulated through licensing, certification processes, informational and promotional activities, coordination and facilitation services, periodical inspections, enforcement of mandatory data entry, evaluation of the foreign patient registration system, patient complaint investigations and performance reviews. With general oversight, the unit aims for quality improvement in the delivery of international health services in Istanbul. The concept of health tourism covers medical tourists, tourists seeking medical care during their travel, patients receiving service under bilateral country agreements and under agreements with TR Social Security Institution (SSI) [4-6].

2. Methods

2.1. Turkey, Investing in Regional Development

The Tenth Development Plan by TR Ministry of Development declares the HT Improvement Program as a Priority Transformation Program for Turkey [7]. Thus, the HT Coordination Council was established, headed by delegates from TR MoH, attended by authorities from seven TR Ministries and representatives from the Council of Higher Education (YOK), the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), the Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEIK) and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) [8].

International patients are classified under four categories, in terms of HT: 1- medical tourists, 2- tourists who receive health services, often EMS, while traveling for leisure, 3- patients from countries with bilateral agreements with TR MoH, and 4- TR SSI [9, 10]. HT is also supported by national grants from TR Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organization (KOSGEB), and from the Ministries of Economy and Development [11].

In compliance with the vision set out by the Tenth Development Plan, TR MoH started the practice of HT Regional Coordination in 2017. Within this scope, eight designated regional coordinators are assigned to facilitate collaboration and enable synergism between provincial representatives. Administrators have TR MoH-defined user authorization for data entry to the Foreign Patient Tracking

System. HT Regional Coordinators are responsible for ensuring effective communication between the affiliated provinces and departments. Provincial representatives are responsible for the reporting of data entry by health institutions providing HT services [12].

An International Patient Assistance Unit Interpretation and Call Center started to serve in six languages in 2017 with interpreters in German, Arabic, English, Russian, Farsi, and French, established in order to provide easy access to health care services for patients visiting Turkey [13].

2.2. Istanbul, the Role of Local Government in Health Tourism

The heartland of cultural and financial identity, the city is uniquely situated in Eurasia, and conveniently located for international intercontinental travel. Access to referral hospitals, medical specialties, advanced technologies and comprehensive health services are among the advantages. TR Ministry officials of Culture and Tourism declare that sixty-two countries recognize Istanbul as a new health partner and a rising medical tourism center, acknowledge the city as a crossroad of convergence between Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa, praised for accessibility and for being a visa-free easy travel destination, acclaimed for well-trained physicians and health care professionals in numerous facilities, and for the use of innovative high technology in the medical field. The quality of service in Turkey’s health care institutions is approved by international organizations such as the Joint Commissions International (JCI), the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAOH) and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). Officials comment that the city confidently moves forward and continues to grow in popularity worldwide, bridging pathways, providing excellence, efficiency, and great hospitality for international patients [14].

In terms of HT Regional Coordination, regional Istanbul consists of seven cities, Istanbul Europe/Anatolia, Izmit, Edirne, Kirklareli, Adapazari, Tekirdag, and Duzce [12].

2.3. Governance for Regional Development: Health Tourism in the City

2.3.1. Website in English

TR MoH HDI launched first web site in English in 2015 at <http://health.istanbulsaglik.gov.tr/> for international access to information regarding health services in Istanbul.

2.3.2. Medical Arabic Language Trainings at the Health Directorate of Istanbul

Sponsored programs continue to serve regional development. An Istanbul Development Agency (ISTKA)-supported

program aimed in 2013 to improve skills and qualifications needed in HT. In collaboration with the HDI, Arabic language courses for medical and service staff were held by the Language Academy and Scientific Research Society. Over the course of the program held for medical and service staff, 518 trainees were certified upon successful completion of the courses [15]. A similar non-sponsored self-pay program was conducted in 2015 and 80 successful administrative and clinical personnel were additionally certified after 12-13 weeks of training [16]. Within the framework of protocols between HDI istanbulism.saglik.gov.tr and Akdemistanbul.akdemistanbul.com.tr, self-pay Medical Arabic certification courses are organized regularly without external funding support, the last of which was recently delivered [17].

2.3.3. Participation and Publicity Activities

Informative sessions for diverse audiences as well as presentations for publicity are routine activities at the HDI. Participation in international congresses and fairs are common, one of which was the Istanbul Health Expo: Health Tourism, Medical Tourism, Medical Expertise Fair and Congress, hosted by TR MoH in 2014 [18]. Annual expo participation contributes to efforts to reach out to diverse populations, associate with stakeholders, present data and information, and promote creativity in international health services provision.

2.3.4. Communication and Collaboration

Dynamic processes with organizations and with relevant parties are priorities. Enhancing communications with representatives from organizations such as ISTKA, EU, the Association of Private Hospitals and Health Institutions (OHSAD), the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURSAB) and additional liaisons target sustainable international and inter-institutional collaborations, and effective partnership policy development.

2.3.5. Presenting a Model

The applicability of the Turkish health transformation model to other developing countries continues to attract the attention of policy-makers from around the world. TR MoH HDI hosts visits by national leaders, especially from the African region [19].

2.3.6. The importance of Data

Data reporting and international patient registries are obligations for providers from both the public and the private sectors. The importance of supervision, as well as careful monitoring of the records and statistics, is emphasized at the TR MoH HDI Health Tourism Unit. Data is crucial in monitoring progress, identifying problem areas, conducting

evaluations, shaping policy, comparing performance, both nationally and internationally.

2.3.7. Istanbul Health Tourism Working Group Meetings

Assembly has been designed, initiated, and directed by author Verda Tunaligil, MD, MPH, PhD to increase communication within the professional community in the city. First meeting was held on Thursday, June 4th of 2015. Meetings led by the Physician in Charge of Istanbul's HT have been periodically attended by representatives from Regional Health Directorates and from Public Hospitals Union General Secretariats of Istanbul. Discussion groups will be extended to include a wide range of institutions in operating in HT [11].

3. Results

The most recent officially confirmed data by TR MoH comprises analysis for years 2015 and 2016. The order of countries from which international patients of HT came to Turkey in 2015 are Libya, Iraq, Germany, Azerbaijan, Russia, Syria, Turkmenistan, Britain, Afghanistan, and Holland in descending order. In 2016 the list was similar but in varied order, consisted of Germany, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Turkmenistan, Britain, Holland, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. In 2015, 392,950 international patients of HT received health services in Turkey, of whom 56% were tourists traveling for leisure, and 44% were patients of medical tourism. Of the 359,668 international HT patients in 2016, 58% were leisure travel tourists, 42% were patients of medical tourism. In both years, Istanbul received the highest number of international patients of HT. Patients from Libya, Azerbaijan, and Iraq were at the forefront [20].

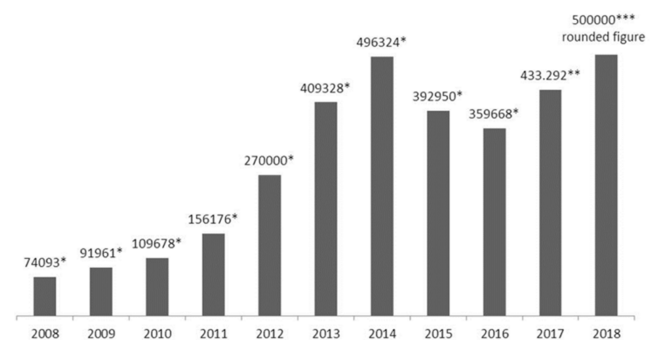


Figure 1. Chart, international HT patients in Turkey (2008-2018).

* Reference for years 2008-2016 [20]. ** Reference for year 2017 [21]. *** References for year 2018 (rounded figure) [22, 23].

A steady rise has been observed within the last decade, regarding the number of international HT patients in Turkey. The fall in the numbers in 2015 and 2016 is likely to be a reflection of the decline in the overall number of foreign

tourists visiting the country, due to events observed to have adversely impacted all types of tourism for temporary periods [Figure 1]. Experts report tourist numbers to have been the lowest in 16 years or more [24].

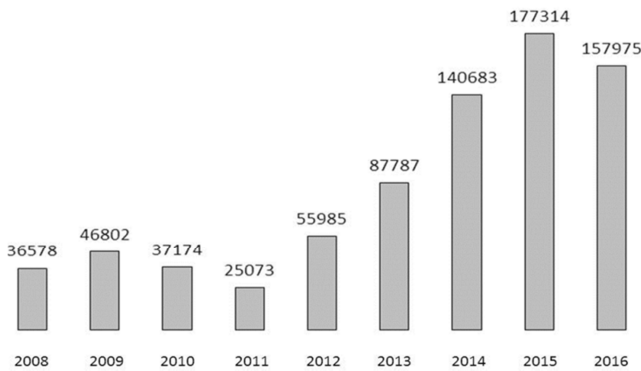


Figure 2. Chart, international HT patients in Istanbul (2008-2016).

References for years 2008-2010 [25]. Reference for year 2011 [26]. Reference for year 2012 [4]. Reference for year 2013 [27]. Reference for year 2014 [28, 29]. Reference for years 2015-2016 [20].

Istanbul ranks first for HT in the country. Considering both categories, numbers are striking. In 2015 and 2016, Istanbul received the highest number of international patients of medical tourism and foreign tourists traveling for leisure [20] [Figure 2].

Table 1. International HT patients in Turkey (2015-2016).

year	# of patients / type of tourism		
	medical tourism	leisure travel	total
2015	135,340	169,069	304,409
2016	106,438	151,844	258,282

In all categories, Istanbul hosted more international HT patients than all other cities combined in the country. Istanbul hosted a total of 177,314 patients in 2015 and 157,975 patients in 2016 [Table 1]. Following these numbers were the others cities, Antalya, Ankara, Izmir, Mugla, Bursa each of which hosted over 10,000 international HT patients per year [20] [Figure 3].

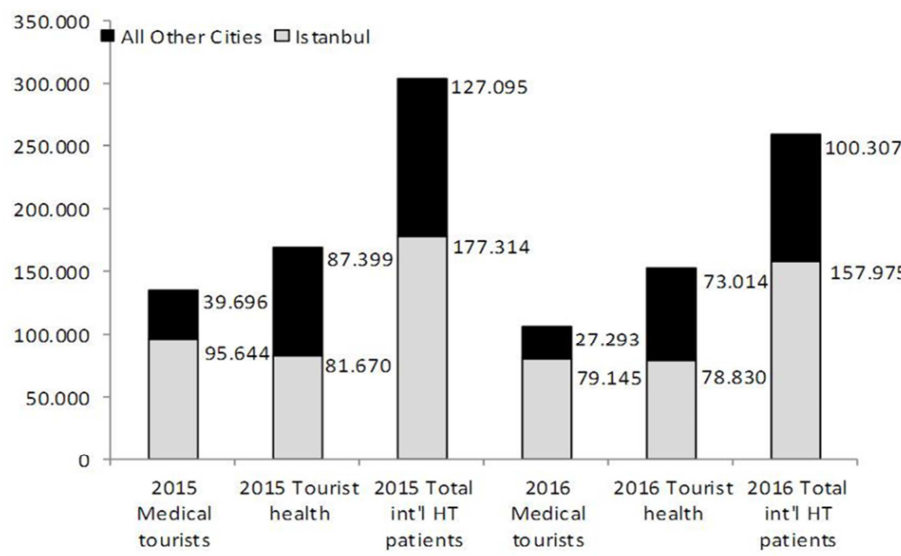


Figure 3. Chart, international HT patients in Istanbul and all other cities (2015-2016).

International patients were seen in private, public, university hospitals, and health institutions throughout the country. In 2015, 66% of the patients received private health care, while 23% were seen in university hospitals and 11% in TR MoH-operated public hospitals. In 2016, 56% of international HT patients preferred private health care institutions, followed by 25% who were treated at university hospitals, and 19% at TR MoH-operated public hospitals. Seven hospitals in 2015 and six hospitals in 2016 out of the top ten most popular private hospitals in the country were in Istanbul. Ten out of ten in 2015 and seven out of ten most popular TR MoH-operated public hospitals in the country in 2016 were in Istanbul. In 2015, in all health care institutions, Emergency Medicine of all specialties received the highest number of international

patients. In medical tourism, the first five specialties were Ophthalmology, Obstetrics/Gynaecology, Paediatrics, Orthopedics/Traumatology, Internal Medicine in 2015, and Obstetrics/Gynaecology, Ophthalmology, Orthopedics/Traumatology, Internal Medicine, Plastic/Reconstructive/Aesthetic Surgery in 2016 in consecutive order [20].

4. Discussion

Development goals and improvements in health care international provision are a continuum in Turkey and in Istanbul. The metropolis is ascending in global order as a new favourite city for international patients. Regional

leadership in HT is the ultimate goal, with commensurate improvements in quality management and affordable international care.

TR Health Minister announced in August 2019 that well-developed national branding strategies to promote HT services will be launched within months [23].

If continuous improvements are achieved in health service delivery, compassionate care by well-trained skilled workforce, accountability, legislative framework, international patient record-keeping, patient satisfaction, use of innovative medical technology, with a firm mission to excel in patient-centered outcomes, while optimal governance and sustainability is ensured, health tourism will continue to generate revenues and contribute to the nation's worldwide reputation in the medical field.

5. Conclusion

The article comments on the role of government and elaborates on governance strategies to promote HT. The view is expressed that investing in HT is an effective instrument of regional development, presenting revenue-generating opportunities. The role of local government in Istanbul is especially highlighted, providing details of HT activities and the authorities' perspectives. Key focal points for advancement in recent years are listed, including the launching of TR MoH HDI's first website in English, the introduction of Medical Arabic language courses for health care professionals and for administrative staff, across-the-board communications with organizations and stakeholders, national and international meeting participations for increased visibility, extensive promotional activities, and the initiation of Istanbul Health Tourism Working Group Meetings to enhance cross team collaborations. The importance of data-monitoring is emphasized. Authors acknowledge that the applicability of the Turkish model presents a design for other countries.

Envisioning the future of international health services, service providers and policy makers are urged to maintain current achievements up to date, sustain and improve quality standards in health care, continue to closely monitor record-keeping, encourage data analysis and evaluations, expand language training programs, keep up with state-of-the-art knowledge, practice, and technology advancements, develop an understanding for ethical, legal, regulatory aspects of HT, be up-to-date on international health policies and international patient safety issues, continue to comply with international standards for accreditation, associate with experts, be informed about the operations of HT insurance companies, identify location-specific advantages and discover new opportunities to excel in wellness tourism,

outsource for efficiency and faster service delivery when convenient, place more emphasis on research on patient satisfaction, encourage and conduct research in HT, share and compare outcomes, facilitate public-private partnerships and international collaborations, motivate your HT workforce, establish ad hoc committees to more successfully address common challenges, set indicators for progress. For more recognition and power in the region in HT, an informed and adaptable attitude with a universal mind-set is to be adopted.

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