

Factors Affecting the Choice of Latvia Inhabitants to Receive Medical Services Abroad

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Abstract: - The growing demand for medical services abroad indicates that medical tourism has become a significant trend in modern society. Today, there are several dozen countries that have set medical tourism as one of the cornerstones of their country's economic development. To decide in favor of medical tourism, factors such as lower treatment costs, the ability to receive the desired procedure faster, as well as a wider range of services than in the home country are most often evaluated. However, considering the wide range of medical tourism destinations, patients must carefully evaluate the criteria they want to meet their wishes and expectations. The aim of the study is to identify factors that influence choice of the Latvian residents to receive medical services abroad. To achieve this goal, a survey of Latvian residents was conducted. The results of the study provide insight into how Latvian medical institutions can improve their operations by serving the country's residents and by starting medical tourism activities.

Key-Words: - Medical tourism, health-care facility choice, influencing factors, Medical Services Abroad, Latvia Inhabitants.

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1 Introduction

Medical tourism has become an integral part of global healthcare, with an estimated value exceeding US\$100 billion and growing at a rate of 15% to 25% per year, [1]. Today, more than 50 countries around the world, including Brazil, Mexico, Israel, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, have recognized medical tourism as an important sector in the development of their economies, [2]. The field of medical tourism can have several benefits, such as the investment of foreign tourist income in the national economy, the exchange of information between countries that promote the development of strategic partnerships, the exchange of technology and knowledge between different countries, as well as the exchange of social and cultural experiences, [3]. The growing trend of medical tourism can create new economic opportunities for countries by creating new jobs, promoting tourism development, and facilitating the attraction of investments in the field of healthcare.

Medical tourists are defined as individuals who travel to receive medical services outside their home country, [4]. This trend may be due to the unavailability of a specific medical procedure in a given region, long waiting lists for specific specialists, and the opportunity to save on costs

associated with receiving medical services, [5]. Medical tourism offers various benefits, but it should be noted that traveling for medical purposes also carries various risks, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and various risks associated with paying for services.

An important factor influencing patients' choice to travel to receive medical services abroad is the level of quality of medical care in their place of residence, as well as the availability of services. In cases where the quality of care in the home country is low any of the necessary services is unavailable, or waiting lists are too long, the patient is forced to seek treatment options abroad. Although medical tourism is very accessible today, careful selection of a destination is essential, as it can directly affect the outcome of treatment. When choosing a medical tourism destination, factors such as the safety of medical procedures, hygiene standards adopted by the healthcare system, as well as possible risks of treatment and manipulation complications, and the ability of the healthcare institution to manage and resolve them should be considered.

The aim of the study is to identify factors that influence the choice of Latvian residents to receive medical services abroad. To achieve the set goal, the following theses were put forward: 1) to analyze the

theoretical aspects of the formation and development of medical tourism and 2) to study the factors that influence the attitude of residents towards medical services. The study used a monographic or descriptive method to analyze the theoretical basis of the study and a survey to understand the opinions of residents on medical factors. The results of the study will provide insight into the development of medical tourism in Latvia and other countries. The research methodology is based on key several theorists.

2 Criteria for Selecting a Medical Service

Regardless of the country of residence, the motivations of medical tourists to travel abroad for medical services are very similar. A study compiled by Turkish researchers in 2020 highlighted such positions as quality of care, tourism opportunities, hygiene requirements, safety, accessibility, as well as opportunities to save financial resources (Figure 1).

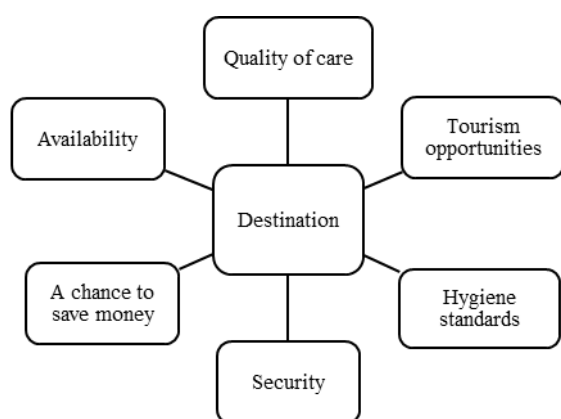


Fig. 1: Factors influencing medical tourists to travel abroad to receive medical services, [6]

Safety and quality of care are among the determining factors in choosing a healthcare provider. Quality in the healthcare system is defined as safe, timely, effective, open, and patient-centered care, [7]. Almost always, when patients seek healthcare services abroad, they want to be sure of the effectiveness of treatment, as well as safety, as it is known that high quality of care is associated with better treatment outcomes, as well as shorter recovery times. Patients' perceptions of service quality play a crucial role in determining patient satisfaction, making it a key factor in determining the performance and reputation of healthcare institutions, [8]. It should be noted that quality healthcare includes not only technical factors, such as new and modern equipment, freshly renovated and equipped facilities, but also the attitude of staff

towards patients and the promotion of a sense of trust. Researchers emphasize five dimensions of service quality, namely:

- tangible dimension – the environmental conditions of the service provision.
- reliability dimension – the ability to reliably deliver the service.
- responsiveness dimension – the desire to promote cooperation with the customer.
- confidence dimension – the competence of the service provider.
- empathy dimension – an approach focused on the individual wishes of the customer, [9]. The sum of all these dimensions contributes to strengthening the image of a quality healthcare service, making it more attractive to patients.

No less important factor is compliance with **hygiene standards**, which are regulated by the epidemiological regulations in a particular country, affecting the choice of medical tourists when going to receive medical services.

Tourism opportunities are a great way to make a destination country more attractive to medical tourists. Patients who travel outside their home country to receive medical services often have several destination options, each of which offers a different range of services and entertainment, unrelated to healthcare opportunities. In countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, or Turkey, where medical tourism is very developed, patients can combine treatment with various types of SPA procedures, visits to cultural sites, or simple relaxation on the beach. Factors such as the prices of tourism products, the availability of cultural and natural attractions, the availability of hospitality establishments and services, as well as treatment and excursion or entertainment packages, [10], can help in deciding in favor of one of the potentially desirable medical tourism destination countries. The overall infrastructure of the destination is no less important - the availability of public transport, the adaptability of the environment, and the availability of various hotels and restaurants. Similarly, a low crime rate and a stable political situation in the country make a particular country an attractive medical tourism destination.

An important factor that influences patients' choice to go to a particular destination is also accessibility - **the availability of services, the availability of specialists**, as well as the overall hospital infrastructure and equipment. The accessibility factor can include such items as:

- waiting time for treatment.
- cost of treatment.

- quality of medical equipment.
- competence of doctors and other medical staff.
- intermediary companies that connect the patient with the medical institution.
- language and cultural differences.
- availability of information, [10].

Medical tourism destinations are also attractive in terms of accessibility because of the **ease of travel to the destination**. If a visa is required to travel to a country, but the process is slow and complicated, this can negatively affect a medical tourist's decision-making, [11]. Patients consider the cost of treatment, travel, and overall healthcare costs, as well as the language barrier, as these can directly influence their choice of destination, meaning that patients are more likely to choose a country where they can easily communicate with healthcare providers and understand the treatment process and medical instructions, [12].

The opportunity to save money is one of the factors that encourage medical tourists to travel to receive their desired service in a country where it is slightly cheaper than in their home country. Price is a significant factor in customers' purchasing decisions, and the medical tourism industry is no exception. In the tourism industry, customers can be attracted by offering significantly lower prices for services, including tourist accommodation, transportation, food, and other entertainment, [13]. The cost of healthcare services includes costs related to medical technology, medications, inpatient treatment, use of facilities, surgeries, and procedures, [13]. Researchers indicate that lower costs are one of the most important factors that a medical tourist chooses a destination of their choice, and it is also the reason why the patient will visit a particular medical tourism destination again in the future, [14].

Choosing a medical tourism destination is a personalized decision influenced by a combination of several factors, including safety, infrastructure, cost savings, and a positive image of the country in general. Healthcare providers should strive to understand the unique desires and needs of medical tourists to be able to provide an appropriate offer. By understanding the factors that drive medical tourism, healthcare providers and destination countries can benefit from this growing market, as well as encourage repeat medical tourist flows.

3 Healthcare in Latvia

The Latvian Medical Law defines healthcare as a set of measures implemented by healthcare service

providers to ensure, maintain, and restore the health of patients, [15]. Healthcare includes both preventive, planned, and emergency medical care. The healthcare system in Latvia is managed and regulated by the Ministry of Health and its subordinate services, such as the National Health Service and the Health Inspectorate. The Ministry of Health develops state policy in the areas of prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and healthcare organizations, [16].

Latvia's healthcare expenditure per capita still lags behind the European Union average, which was 21,114 euros in 2021, which means that on average 27% of total healthcare expenditure is covered by households from their private budgets, [17]. However, not all necessary or desired medical procedures can be received with state co-financing. State-funded healthcare services can only be received in Latvian medical institutions that have concluded contractual relations with the National Health Service, [18]. State healthcare services are financed by annually allocating a few quotas, which often run out faster than patients' demand for the necessary services is met. In such cases, the patient must either pay for healthcare services from his or her private budget or wait until the following year, when the quotas will be renewed. Patients are provided with services such as:

- a visit to a family doctor.
- healthcare provided by a specialist.
- laboratory tests and medical manipulations with a referral from a family doctor or specialist.
- healthcare in a day hospital.
- healthcare at home.
- emergency medical assistance call.
- emergency medical assistance in hospitals and trauma centers.
- rehabilitation after the treatment phase.
- reimbursed medications and medical devices, [19].

According to statistics, the total population of Latvia in 2023 was 1,883,008, while the number of practicing doctors was only 6,309, [20]. This means that for every 297 Latvian residents, there was one doctor, which is a significantly lower figure than in several other European countries. Due to the low number of medical professionals, patients often must face long waiting lists for specific specialists, as well as limited access to diagnostic examinations (Table 1). State-funded healthcare services in Latvia can be received: For Latvian citizens and non-citizens.

- Citizens of EU Member States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland who have entered an employment relationship or are residing

in Latvia as self-employed persons, as well as their family members.

- Foreigners who have a permanent residence permit in Latvia.
- Refugees and persons who have been granted alternative status.
- Children of the above-mentioned residents under the age of 18.
- Spouses of Latvian citizens and non-citizens who have a temporary residence permit in Latvia may also receive state-funded maternity care and maternity assistance free of charge, [21].

Table 1. Healthcare Resources in Latvia in 2023, [22]

Indicator	Number
Number of practicing doctors in Latvia	6 309
Number of inhabitants per practicing doctor	297
X-ray machines	286
Computed tomography machines	76
Magnetic resonance machines	44
Inpatients	55
Outpatient medical institutions	3 980

Although the Latvian healthcare system has undergone changes in recent years, challenges related to limited funding, a shortage of medical professionals, as well as unequal access to healthcare across the regions of Latvia still exist.

In parallel with state-funded medicine, there is a private sector in Latvia, where 396 medical institutions are registered as of 2024. The spectrum of medical services provided by these institutions is very wide. It is the private sector that is interested in the development of medical tourism in Latvia. By understanding the patient selection criteria for using medical services outside Latvia, these private medical institutions can improve their activities by offering services on-site to both local patients and foreign medical tourists, [21].

4 Methodology

The aim of the study is to identify the factors that influence the choice of Latvian residents to receive medical services abroad. A quantitative research method was chosen for the implementation of the study, within the framework of which a survey of Latvian residents was conducted. To identify the opinion of Latvian residents on the factors that promote the desire to seek medical assistance abroad, the author of the study developed a questionnaire, with the help of which current information was identified. Preparation for the use of this method includes five stages:

1. The authors of the study selected a standardized open questionnaire, which offered all respondents the same questions with the same sequence, which ensured an objective comparison of answers.

2. The survey questionnaire was created on the Google Forms website and distributed through various social networks. To ensure the representativeness of the study, the sample was formed using the typical case method. The most typical respondents were defined as Latvian residents who had used at least five different medical services in Latvia in the last year, [23]. The questionnaires completed by 181 respondents were considered valid for the study. All Latvians in 2024 were taken as the general population. At a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the minimum sample size was calculated to be 385 respondents, [24].

3. To identify questions about the population's assessment of medical services, a focus group interview was conducted. Considering the results of the pilot study analysis, questions were prepared.

4. In the formulation of each question, so that respondents would want to answer, and the answers were correct, the authors of the work followed the recommendations of specialists on the formulation of questions and their sequence, [25].

5. In the case of several possible answer options, the authors of the work list situations, types of actions, etc., which should be noted by the respondents. For questions with several possible answer options, the percentage of the answer in the total amount of answer options was calculated. Next, the answers were processed and analyzed.

5 Research Results

As part of the study, a survey of Latvian residents was conducted, which allowed us to clarify the main reasons why medical assistance is sometimes sought abroad. The survey was divided into three blocks, namely, the first block of the survey was dedicated to clarifying the demographic data of the respondents, as well as dividing the respondents into those who have received medical tourism services abroad and those who have not. The next part of the survey was intended for respondents who had received medical services abroad. By indicating an affirmative answer to the question in the first block about receiving medical services abroad, the respondents were automatically redirected to the questions in the second block, which provided an in-depth insight into the reasons for a total of 171 respondents participated in the survey, of whom 78.9% were

women, and 20.5% were men, but 0.6% of the surveyed respondents did not wish to indicate their gender. Participation in this survey was voluntary and the selection was based on the principles of convenience and accessibility.

Many survey participants were in the age group of 25-34 years (n=44), the second largest group were respondents aged 35-44 years (n=38). 37 respondents participated in the age group of 18-24, while 33 respondents participated in the age group of 45-54 years. 18 respondents participated in the age group of 55-64. One respondent who was older than 64 years participated in the survey. No respondents younger than 18 years of age participated in the survey.

The Riga and Riga vicinity region accounted for the largest number of respondents (n=112), 23 respondents from the Vidzeme region participated in the survey, 17 respondents from Kurzeme, 13 from Zemgale, and 6 respondents from the Latgale region. 80 of all surveyed respondents affirmatively indicated receiving medical tourism services abroad, while 91 respondents indicated that they had not received such services.

The questions in the next block could only be answered by those respondents who had marked the previous question about receiving services in the affirmative. In the question about what medical services residents have received abroad, it was possible to indicate several answer options, as well as to write in the free form the answer that was suitable for them, which was not indicated in the options. Most survey participants indicated that they had received surgical services (n=39), the second largest group of responses or 32 respondents had received specialist consultations (Figure 2). 30 of the respondents had received diagnostic services within the framework of medical tourism, 18 – preventive services, but 15 respondents indicated that they had received rehabilitation services abroad. Instead of the free form, 5 of the surveyed respondents indicated that they had received dental services abroad. The answers provided by the survey participants in this study coincide with global trends. As mentioned in a study conducted by the Medical Tourism Association, the most frequently mentioned service received as part of medical tourism is surgical services, most often those offered by plastic surgery, [26].

In the next question, the study participants were allowed to write down in free form the main reasons that made them seek medical services abroad. When summing up the answers, the most common factors were “the opportunity to save money”, “the country of residence did not offer the specific service”, “high

qualification of specialists in foreign clinics” and “combining medical manipulations with travel” were also emphasized. Based on theoretical considerations, the most common reasons why people go on medical tourism are the opportunity to save money, receive the specific service without the waiting time that would have been in their home country, as well as the absence of a specific technology or procedure in their home country, [6].

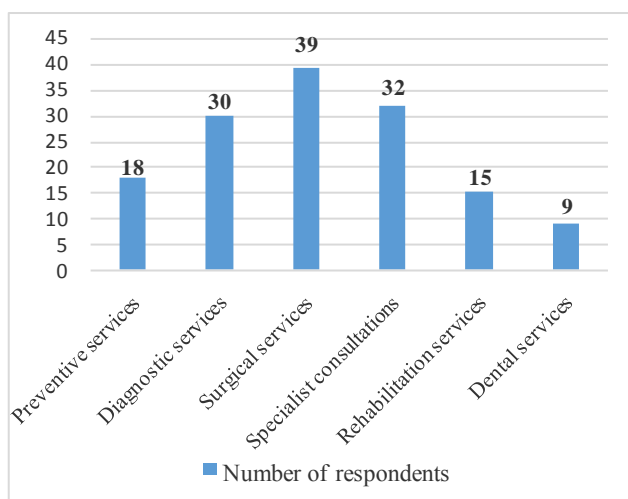


Fig. 2: Services received by respondents within the framework of medical tourism (created by the authors)

For a successful cooperation between a doctor and a patient to develop, it is based on the patient's ability to trust the medical staff. The study participants indicated that the ability to trust a foreign service provider has been important (n=44) or even very important (n=36) for them. Similarly, 72.5% (n=58) of the study participants indicated that they would use the opportunity to receive a free remote consultation from a medical service provider abroad if such an opportunity were available. 21.3% (n=17) of the respondents indicated “don't know” when asked about the possibility of a free remote consultation, however, 6.3% (n=5) of the respondents indicated that they would not use such an opportunity. Trust in a service provider can be promoted in several ways, such as by creating an image of a safe service, medical institution, or specialist. One such way is involvement in industry-related associations, such as in this case the Medical Tourism Association. Although the majority of the study participants, or 52.5% (n=42), admitted that they did not know whether the clinic they went to was internationally accredited and 3.7% (n=3) indicated that the clinic did not have internationally recognized accreditation, 43.8% (n=25) indicated

that they went to an institution that is a member of the Medical Tourism Association.

At the end of this block of questions, respondents were asked to evaluate the quality of the medical services received abroad. The majority, or 62.5% (n=50), indicated that they were very satisfied with the quality of the services received, 33.8% (n=27) indicated that they were satisfied with the services received, however, 3.7% (n=3) of the surveyed respondents admitted that they felt neutral or “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” with the quality of the services received. In general, it can be concluded that the experience of receiving medical services abroad was positive.

At the end of the survey, all respondents who participated in the survey, both those who had received medical services abroad and those who had not, had the opportunity to answer the questions of the third block. The first question allowed the respondents to express their opinion regarding what were the main factors that influenced the decision to seek medical services abroad. There was an opportunity to choose several answer options for this specific question. The most frequently mentioned factor was “lower costs”, chosen by 105 of the respondents. “Higher quality of service”, indicated by 101 of the respondents, was evaluated with a very similar result (Figure 3). Faster access to necessary services was noted as a factor influencing the choice to receive medical services abroad by 90 of the respondents. A similar number of respondents, or 89 residents, indicated that they consider “availability of more modern equipment” to be one of the factors that motivate them to go to foreign medical service providers. 79 respondents believe that “a wider range of services” is a determining factor in their choice.

In the final questions, the participants of the study were asked about their opinions on the availability of health services in Latvia. 37.4% (n=64) of respondents assessed health services in Latvia as rather accessible, while 28.1% (n=48) assessed them as accessible. 24% (n=41) indicated that they assessed health services in Latvia as rather inaccessible, while 5.8% (n=10) assessed them as inaccessible, while 1.8% (n=3) of respondents assessed health care services in Latvia as very inaccessible. In turn, 2.9% (n=5) of respondents assessed health services in Latvia as very accessible. The lack of accessibility of services can encourage residents to go to receive medical services outside their country of residence, as it often saves time in waiting lines for a specific examination or specialist.

The final question of the study was focused on assessing the quality of healthcare services in Latvia,

on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest grade, and 5 is the highest.

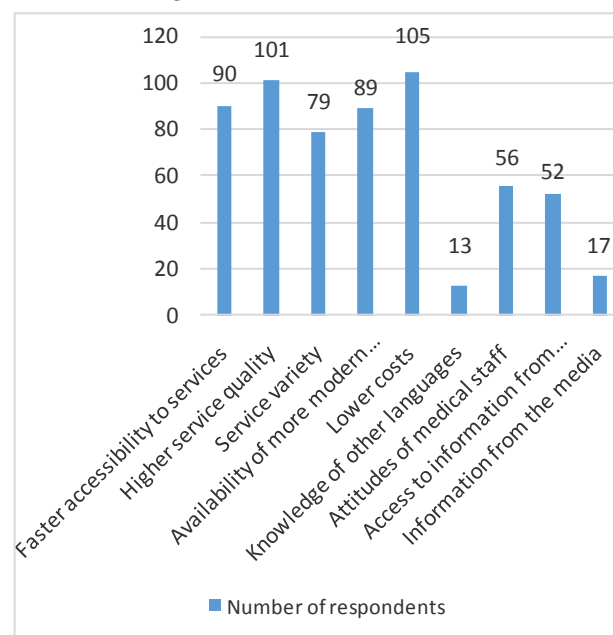


Fig. 3: Factors influencing respondents' choice to receive medical services abroad (author's creation)

The study participants mostly assessed the quality of healthcare in Latvia as average, with a grade of 3 (n=79). A grade of 4, or above average, was marked by 51 survey participants, while 12 respondents gave 5 points, or the highest assessment. 24 survey participants indicated that they would assess the quality of healthcare in Latvia with a grade of 2, while 5 of the survey participants assessed this sector with a grade of 1, which is the lowest assessment in this category.

According to the study data, it can be concluded that respondents mainly seek medical assistance abroad for reasons such as the opportunity to receive the desired medical service faster, save financial resources, as well as, in their opinion, receive higher quality medical services. The surveyed respondents most often went for medical tourism to receive surgical services, as well as specialist consultations, indicating that they were satisfied with the quality of the services received. The study participants rated healthcare in Latvia as mediocre, which indicates an increased motivation to seek medical help abroad.

6 Conclusions

1. The main reason why patients go to receive medical services abroad is dissatisfaction with the availability of services, as well as the quality of healthcare in their home country.

2. In Latvia, residents can receive healthcare using state co-financing, which is provided through the National Health Service, however, due to limited state budget funds, private funds sometimes have to be invested, which opens up the opportunity to develop the offer of private medical institutions by developing the availability of services.
3. According to the survey results, it can be concluded that the survey participants rate the quality of healthcare in Latvia as mediocre.
4. The survey data show that the main factors motivating Latvian residents to seek medical services abroad are the opportunity to save financial resources, in their opinion, higher quality of services, as well as the opportunity to reduce waiting times for a specific service.
5. The study data indicate that the most frequently used medical services abroad among the respondents are surgical services, specialist consultations, as well as diagnostic services.
6. According to the survey data, it can be concluded that the majority of survey participants assess healthcare services in Latvia as accessible, which indicates that the opportunities provided by medical tourism are evaluated for reasons unrelated to accessibility.).
7. Based on the study, private medical institutions can improve their range of services by offering the most requested services by Latvian patients outside Latvia, preventing the outflow of patients abroad.
8. Understanding patients' evaluation of medical services and the range offered can also lay the foundation for the development of medical tourism in Latvia.
9. In future studies, it is important to clarify the opinion of foreign medical tourists about the range, quality, and prices of medical procedures in Latvia.

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Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)

- Iveta Linina is the lead author.
- Matiss Jakunov developed the experimental plan and organized its execution.
- Rosita Zvirgzdina was responsible for the data processing.
- Velga Vevere the article was translated into English.

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