



The Investigation of Health Tourism Potential: The Case of Samsun Province

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Abstract

Aim: To determine the current situation by evaluating the health services offered to health tourists in Samsun province and to reveal the health tourism potential with health tourism data.

Methods: The population of this descriptive cross-sectional study consists of health tourists who received health services in Samsun province between 2017-2021. Data were obtained through the foreign patient tracking system and e-nabız.

Results: The number of health tourists has increased with increasing momentum over the years. According to the type of arrival of health tourists, health services were provided mostly within the scope of health tourism. The clinics to which health tourists mostly applied are emergency medicine, gynaecology and ophthalmology clinics. The highest number of health tourist applications were in July, August and September.

Conclusion: It was determined that Samsun province has a health tourism potential. This potential

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should be developed by integrating medical tourism with other types of health tourism and by carrying out joint activities with the co-operation of all stakeholders.

Keywords: Health, Health Tourism, Health Tourists, Medical Tourism

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisation defines health as ‘not only the absence of disease and disability but also the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being’ (WHO, 2023). People seek health services to protect and improve their health, to treat and rehabilitate diseases. As a result of developments in science and technology, human life span has increased and the elderly population has started to increase. Accordingly, the share allocated to health expenditures is increasing and the global health market is growing day by day. International health tourism can be defined as all health services received by individuals who have come from abroad for a temporary period of time to receive health services, who are not citizens of the country or who are citizens of the country but continue to reside abroad, as well as the support services they receive related to them. Health services provided to individuals who are temporarily in another country for any reason other than their own country and who develop unexpected illnesses and emergencies during this period are defined as ‘tourist health’. International health tourists are defined as patients who receive health services within the scope of these two concepts (Official Gazette, 2017; Ministry of Health, 2015; Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, 2023; TurkStat, 2023). Under the main heading of health tourism, there are health tourism types such as medical tourism, third age tourism, disabled tourism, thermal/SPA wellness tourism (Tengilimoğlu, 2020).

There are many definitions of health tourism in the literature (A.Glinos, Baeten, Helble, & Maarse, 2010; Bookman & Bookman, 2007; Carmen & Iuliana, 2014; Cohen, 2008; Connell, 2006; Lee & Spisto, 2007; Yu & Ko, 2012). Health tourism is the temporary visit of a health tourist, who is in search of health services due to various factors, to a place other than his/her place of residence to receive the health services he/she needs. The most important points affecting the choice of health facility and country by health tourists within the scope of health tourism are the cost, medical technology, quality of health service and rapid treatment methods, the presence of physicians specialised in their field, accommodation criteria and accreditation of the health facility (Ministry of Health, 2015). It is known that Turkey has health facilities that can provide health services to international health tourists within the scope of health tourism, competent health

personnel, technical equipment, knowledge and technology (T.C. Ministry of Health, 2023). Turkey's advantages positively affect its preference in health tourism.

Health tourism is a service export sector that includes knowledge, experience and labour that earns foreign currency in order to contribute to the national economy. In 2021, 670,730 health tourists received health services in Turkey and the income from health tourists amounted to 1 billion 726 million 973 thousand dollars. In 2022, 1 million 258 thousand 382 people received health services within the scope of health tourism and the income obtained was 2.119.059 thousand dollars. In 2023, 1,398,504 people came to Turkey to receive health services and the income obtained increased further and amounted to 2,307,130 thousand dollars (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, 2023; Republic of Turkey Ministry of Trade, 2023; TurkStat, 2023; USHAŞ, 2023).

Samsun, which is the centre of the Black Sea Region in terms of geographical location, is one of the cities with the highest tourism potential in the region with its nature, plateaus, canyon, hot springs, cultural and historical richness, beaches, sea, highway, international airport, railway and transportation facilities (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023). At the same time, Samsun has the competence to meet the demands of health tourists at the highest level with its health facilities, bed capacity of health facilities, quality of health services, production facilities of medical devices and surgical hand tools, medical technology and technical equipment, health professionals specialised in their fields, trained manpower, agencies providing intermediary services, sports facilities suitable for international Olympics, spas and accommodation facilities (Samsun Provincial Health Directorate, 2023; T.C. Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023). When the accommodation facilities in Samsun province are evaluated, there are 3 5-star, 9 4-star hotels, 2 of which are thermal hotels, 15 3-star, 4 2-star hotels, boutique hotels and pensions (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023).

The health infrastructure of Samsun province has a total of 4,440 physicians, including 1959 specialists and 719 dentists, and a total of 22,849 qualified human resources, including 5,811 midwives and nurses. It has a total of 27 hospitals, including 10 state hospitals, 3 integrated district hospitals, 2 branch hospitals, 1 oral and dental health hospital, 1 medical faculty hospital, 1 dentistry faculty, 1 training and research hospital, 8 private hospitals, with a total capacity of 5293 beds. It has a strong health infrastructure with 3 oral and dental health centres, 6 medical centres, 5 dialysis centres, 28 dental polyclinics, 108 free physician offices, 188 free dentist offices, 447

family medicine units, 2 healthy life centres. In addition to all internal and surgical health services, many specialised services such as tissue and organ transplantation, IVF treatment, stroke centre, traditional and complementary medicine centres, medical and radiation oncology centres, obesity centre, nuclear medicine centres, dialysis, burns, palliative care, home health care services, genetic diseases evaluation centre are offered. There are 38 health facilities, including 1 training and research hospital, 1 medical faculty university hospital, 1 oral and dental health hospital, 2 state hospitals, 8 private hospitals, 4 medical centres, 4 oral and dental health polyclinics, 17 medical practices, and 7 intermediary institutions with the Ministry of Health International Health Tourism Authorisation Certificate. Considering that health facilities and intermediary organisations that do not have the mentioned International Health Tourism Authorisation Certificate cannot engage in health tourism activities, it has been foreseen that health facilities and intermediary organisations that want to engage in health tourism activities will obtain an international health tourism authorisation certificate. It is stated that Samsun province, which has an important potential within the scope of health tourism, ranked 7th in the list of provinces with the highest number of applications within the scope of health tourism in 2020 (Ministry of Health, 2021; Samsun Provincial Health Directorate, 2023). Considering the new investments made in Samsun province, it is obvious that the existing potential will increase even more. With the completion of Samsun City Hospital, one of the most important health investments in the Black Sea Region, it has been predicted that it will further increase the mobility of health tourists within the scope of health tourism and will receive a higher share of the income obtained within the scope of health tourism.

This study tries to determine the current situation and health tourism potential of Samsun province with health tourism data. The importance of the study can be noted that one of the rare studies evaluating the current situation and health tourism potential of Samsun province with health tourism data and that it will contribute to the field.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population of this descriptive cross-sectional study consists of health tourists who applied to receive health services in Samsun province between 2017-2021. The anonymised data of all health tourists who received health services within the scope of health tourism were obtained by applying to Samsun Provincial Health Directorate. In this study, health tourist data for 2017 and 2018 were

obtained from the Foreign Patient Tracking System, and health tourist data for 2019 and later were obtained from the e-Nabız system due to the system change. Descriptive analysis method was used in the evaluation of the data. Ethics committee approval dated 23/01/2023 and numbered 2023/02 was obtained from Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University. Institutional permission was obtained from Samsun Provincial Health Directorate dated 11/03/2022 and numbered E-26521195-604.02.02.

2. ANALYSIS

The study was carried out by examining the number of applications of health tourists receiving health services in Samsun province between 2017-2021. Within the context of the study, the distribution of health tourists according to years, type of arrival, type of institution, type of clinic they applied to, countries and time of application is given.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the number of applications of health tourists in Samsun province according to years and type of arrival. It has been noted that the number of health tourists continues with increasing momentum over the years. When the type of arrival of health tourists according to years is evaluated, it has been observed that 44.53% of tourists came within the scope of health tourism 55.47% in the total of 5 years.

Table 1: Distribution of the Number of Applications of Health Tourists in Samsun Province by Years and Type of Arrival

Type of arrival	2017		2018		2019		2020		2021		Toplam	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The Health of tourist	1467	75,31	1477	38,58	9158	58,00	5885	32,42	13267	43,73	31254	44,53
Health Tourism	481	24,69	2351	61,42	6753	42,00	12268	67,58	17072	56,27	38925	55,47
Total	1948	100	3828	100	15911	100	18153	100	30339	100	70179	100

The distribution of the number of applications of health tourists according to the type of institution is given in Table 2. It has been determined that health tourists received health services from private health facilities at a rate of 51% in 2017, 70% in 2018, 80% in 2019, 61% in 2020, and 59% in 2021. Among the types of institutions divided into three groups as public, university and private,

it is seen that health tourists mostly receive health services from private health facilities.

Table 2: Distribution of the Number of Applications of Health Tourists by Type of Institution

Type of Institution	2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Public	508	26,08	711	18,57	2137	13,43	6357	35,02	9537	31,43
University	445	22,84	452	11,81	1014	6,37	698	3,85	2906	9,58
Private	995	51,08	2665	69,62	12760	80,20	11098	61,14	17896	58,99
Total	1948	100	3828	100	15911	100	18153	100	30339	100

It has been figured out that the most common clinic where health tourists apply is the emergency medicine clinic. 29% in 2017, 19.57% in 2018, 15.10% in 2019, 25.64% in 2020, and 34.52% in 2021. Table 3 shows the distribution of health tourists according to the clinics they applied to. Although health tourists apply to different clinics at different rates every year, the most preferred clinical branches are emergency medicine, gynecology, ophthalmology, general surgery, internal medicine, orthopedics and traumatology, dermatology, otolaryngology, cardiology, urology, physical medicine and rehabilitation, neurosurgery, plastic and reconstructive aesthetic surgery.

Table 3: Distribution of Health Tourists according to the Clinics

Clinics	2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Emergency	565	29,00	749	19,57	2403	15,10	4655	25,64	10378	34,09
Gynaecology and Obstetrics	117	6,01	169	4,41	1786	11,22	1945	10,71	2408	7,91
Eye Diseases	111	5,70	139	3,63	1425	8,96	1388	7,65	1520	4,99
General Surgery	75	3,85	255	6,66	702	4,41	943	5,19	1181	3,88
Internal Medicine	69	3,54	167	4,36	971	6,10	1055	5,81	1210	3,98
Orthopaedics and Traumatology	76	3,90	190	4,96	856	5,38	805	4,43	1070	3,52
Dermatology	34	1,75	107	2,80	807	5,07	749	4,13	737	2,42
Ear Nose Throat	72	3,70	121	3,16	552	3,47	622	3,43	646	2,12
Cardiology	51	2,62	206	5,38	530	3,33	558	3,07	580	1,91
Urology	52	2,67	161	4,21	504	3,17	492	2,71	520	1,71
Physical Medicine and Rehab.	44	2,26	157	4,10	381	2,39	332	1,83	506	1,66

Brain and Nerve Surgeon	38	1,95	132	3,45	340	2,14	293	1,61	441	1,45
Plastic Surgery	177	9,09	231	6,03	447	2,81	73	0,40	100	0,33
Other	467	23,97	1044	27,27	4207	26,44	4247	23,37	9142	30,03
Total	1948	100	3828	100	15911	100	18153	100	30339	100

The distribution of health tourists by country between 2017 and 2021 is given in Table 4. Health tourists from 145 different countries have been found to prefer Samsun province to receive health services. In the table, the countries where the most health tourists come from are listed, and although the application rates by country have changed over the years, the first four countries in the ranking are Iraq, Germany, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, which are the countries where the most health tourists come every year.

Table 4: Distribution of Health Tourists by Countries

Country	2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Iraq	596	30,60	1154	30,15	9661	60,72	12876	70,93	14480	47,73
Germany	255	13,09	989	25,84	727	4,57	560	3,08	3710	12,23
Azerbaijan	199	10,22	217	5,67	629	3,95	631	3,48	1257	4,14
Georgia	256	13,14	448	11,70	1204	7,57	746	4,11	1147	3,78
Afghanistan	49	2,52	40	1,04	382	2,40	756	4,16	1046	3,45
Austria	12	0,62	120	3,13	133	0,84	46	0,25	516	1,70
Iran	43	2,21	10	0,26	106	0,67	201	1,11	437	1,44
Netherlands	38	1,95	209	5,46	75	0,47	84	0,46	372	1,23
Turkmenistan	29	1,49	25	0,65	133	0,84	259	1,43	335	1,10
Romania	3	0,15	3	0,08	28	0,18	186	1,02	300	0,99
Uzbekistan	17	0,87	23	0,60	70	0,44	85	0,47	291	0,96
France	23	1,18	59	1,54	58	0,36	37	0,20	229	0,75
Russia Fed.	41	2,10	24	0,63	115	0,72	101	0,56	252	0,83
Other	387	19,87	507	13,24	2590	16,28	1585	8,73	5967	19,67
Total	1948	100	3828	100	15911	100	18153	100	30339	100

The distribution of the application times of health tourists by months during the year is given in Table 5. It was determined that the highest number of health tourist applications were in July, August and September.

Table 5: Distribution of Health Tourists by Application Time

Months	2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
January	117	6,01	173	4,52	864	5,43	1788	9,85	1264	4,17
February	106	5,44	182	4,75	972	6,11	1609	8,86	1460	4,81
Mart	128	6,57	173	4,52	1049	6,59	1456	8,02	1773	5,84
April	91	4,67	241	6,30	888	5,58	589	3,24	2180	7,19
May	123	6,31	238	6,22	1139	7,16	790	4,35	3178	10,47
June	125	6,42	247	6,45	942	5,92	1537	8,47	3102	10,22
July	400	20,53	475	12,41	1832	11,51	1713	9,44	3355	11,06
August	264	13,55	607	15,86	1724	10,84	1872	10,31	4177	13,77
September	177	9,09	456	11,91	1597	10,04	1994	10,98	3243	10,69
October	136	6,98	435	11,36	1704	10,71	1683	9,27	2359	7,78
November	134	6,88	305	7,97	1602	10,07	1660	9,14	2056	6,78
December	147	7,55	296	7,73	1598	10,04	1462	8,05	2192	7,23
Total	1948	100	3828	100	15911	100	18153	100	30339	100

3. DISCUSSION

When the results of studies on health tourism potential in different regions of Turkey using different methods are taken into consideration, it has been determined that there is health tourism potential in many regions (Ataberk & Baykal, 2011; Bozça, Kırac, & Kırac, 2017; Büyüközkan, Mukul, & Kongar, 2021; Çetinkaya, 2010; Dalkıran, 2017; Dinçer, Aydoğan Çiftçi, & Karayılan, 2016; Dökme, 2016; Eriş, 2019; Köstepen, 2015; Onur İçöz, 2009; Şahin & Uysal Şahin, 2018; Yorulmaz & Söyler, 2020). In some studies, results stating that the current situation and health infrastructure are not at an adequate level within the scope of medical tourism were also found (Gökdayı & Polat, 2015). According to the results of a study conducted by taking the opinions of physicians working in Samsun province, it has been concluded that physicians were undecided about Samsun's medical tourism potential and the institutional competencies of hospitals (Demir & Sağlık 2020).

In a study conducted by taking the opinions of people receiving health services within the scope of health tourism, it has been noted that Samsun has health tourism potential and especially medical tourism is interesting (Gül, 2019). In another study conducted by taking the opinions of health tourists receiving health services in Samsun, it has been stated that Samsun has an important

potential in medical tourism (Demir, Oruç, Baştürk, & Övey, 2020).

It has been observed that the number of health tourists in Samsun continued with increasing momentum between 2017 and 2021. In 2019, there is a significant increase in the number of health tourist applications. This acceleration is thought to be the result of the activities carried out by the Provincial Health Directorate within the scope of health tourism (Samsun Provincial Health Directorate, 2023). Provincial Directorate of Health has carried out various activities to promote the health tourism potential of Samsun province to tourism agencies, tour operators and other sector professionals from all over the world at the world's largest international fairs. In addition, with the health tourism panel organised, detailed information on international health tourism was given and evaluations were made on the health tourism potential of the province. In addition, emphasis was placed on training relevant personnel on health tourism and awareness on health tourism was raised by organising trainings on the registration and invoicing processes of international patients in hospitals. In addition, trainings were provided on the certification of health facilities within the scope of health tourism and obtaining a health tourism authorisation certificate. It is thought that these trainings contribute to the correct registration procedures and the provision of qualified health tourism services.

In this study, when the type of arrival of health tourists according to years was evaluated, it has been determined that they mostly applied within the scope of health tourism (55.47%). Health tourists who are provided health services within the scope of tourist health are also important. Because the health tourist, who receives health services in case of unexpected illness and emergency in the country where they are temporarily located, sharing the health service they receive when they return to their own country in a satisfied manner increases the potential of the people they share with to come to the country where they receive services as health tourists within the scope of health tourism. For this reason, it has been expected that the proportion of people coming within the scope of health tourism among health tourists will increase more over the years. In a study conducted in Trabzon, according to the type of arrival of health tourists, it was stated that between 2013 and 2015, 70% of the people who came for tourism purposes received services within the scope of tourist health and 30% received services within the scope of health tourism (Yılmaz et al., 2019).

When the number of applications of health tourists according to the type of institution is analysed, it has been figured out that health tourists mostly receive health services from private

health facilities (58.99%). In addition to the high number of private health facilities with health tourism authorisation certificates engaged in health tourism activities, the fact that private health facilities have more advertising and promotional activities within the scope of health tourism is considered as one of the reasons for preference. According to a study conducted in the Thrace region, health tourism activities are concentrated in public hospitals in Kırklareli and Edirne and in private hospitals in Tekirdağ Province (Dalkıran, 2017).

In our study, it has been determined that health tourists from 145 different countries preferred Samsun to receive health services. Although application rates have changed from country to country over the years, the countries where the most health tourists come have not changed. The fact that Samsun has direct flights to countries such as Iraq, Germany and Austria, that many Iraqis live in Samsun and recommend health services to their own country's citizens, that there is a large Turkish population living in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, and that it is geographically close to countries such as Georgia and Azerbaijan. It has been noted that the availability of road transportation and the fact that Samsun has the strongest health infrastructure in the Black Sea region contribute positively to the higher number of health tourists coming from these countries. It has been mentioned that by increasing the availability of direct flights to Samsun from more countries, the number of health tourists will increase further and the rates of health tourists coming from countries with direct flights may change over the years.

When the application times of health tourists by months throughout the year are examined; The highest number of health tourist applications was in July, August and September. In a study conducted in Trabzon, it was stated that the most health tourists came in August and more health tourists came in June, July and September (Yılmaz et al., 2019). As in tourism, demand for health tourism is higher in the summer months. It has been noteworthy that the demand, which is higher in the summer months, spreads throughout the year. In the studies carried out within the scope of health tourism, health services should be diversified with other types of health tourism and package health services should be offered, taking into account the spread of health tourism over 12 months.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The increasing number of health tourists every year and the health services they prefer reveal that the province is an important destination in terms of health tourism. The diversity of services and clinics offered by health facilities show that Samsun is a prominent center in the field of health

tourism. In addition, data such as the countries where health tourists visit the most and the peak periods provide important findings in determining the potential of health tourism.

The health facilities that Samsun has, the bed capacity of the health facilities, the quality of the health service, medical device production facilities, medical technology and technical equipment, expert health professionals, trained manpower, agencies providing intermediary services, sports facilities suitable for international Olympics, spas and It shows that it has the competence to meet the demands of health tourists at the highest level with its accommodation facilities. In order to further develop this potential, medical tourism needs to be integrated with other types of health tourism and all health tourism stakeholders need to work in cooperation.

It has been concluded that Samsun province has health tourism potential and that a joint effort should be made by all relevant stakeholders to further develop this potential. In future studies, it is recommended to increase cooperation among relevant stakeholders and conduct further research to develop the health tourism sector of the province in a sustainable manner.

Author Contributions

All authors declare that they have contributed to the design, execution and analysis of the manuscript and approve the final version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in the study.

Financial disclosure

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