



Health and wellbeing tourism: the Cuban experience

Dr Gelacio Aday Romeu, Director of International Medical Services,
CUBANACAN - Health and Tourism

Health Tourism is one of the Cuban exports that has seen the greatest and most important development in the last twenty years

In analysing what has occurred in Cuba in recent years in the area of Health Tourism as a specialised sector, we would like to begin with the concepts and definitions that will allow us to explore our reality, enabling us to share our criteria and perspectives with regard to the sector.

What initiated the Cuban experience in terms of Health Tourism was, without a doubt, the high level achieved by Cuban medicine, motivated by the political will of the state and a concept that arose from the solidarity, humanity and the internationalist character of Cuban Public Health from its inception.

Health Tourism embodies the offering of a service and export of health and medical services in an economic and commercial sense. It is the product and outcome of knowledge and development of human capital. As such, it has acquired a special significance, to the point of becoming one of the most important characteristics in the trade of goods and services of our country with the world, without affecting one of the basic principles of our society – solidarity through medical cooperation, free of charge, with more than 60 Third World countries that do not possess the necessary economic resources to pay for them.

Services are provisions that, unlike goods, cannot be seen, touched, stored, or transported and usually require the physical proximity between the provider of the service and the client. For economists, everything that in commerce is sold but does not hit your feet when falling is considered a service. We can therefore reaffirm that Health Tourism in Cuba is one of the exports in services that has had considerable and significant development in the last 20 years.

A health service constitutes the end product of an action or a chain of actions, with a specific duration and location, resulting from the defined interaction between various types of products and services and the consumer, the patient and his family, who are looking to improve their state of health or prevent a disease.

Its offering does not accumulate with time and its structure is configured only at the time of demand, thereby making the health service more than a means of production; rather, it is the relationship between the system and the user, i.e. the patient.

The concept of health is modified more and more with time, acquiring more flexibility as processes, treatments and techniques advance. Nowadays, the term ‘quality of life’ is not only associated with the processes that determine the eradication of a disease and its prevention, but also the improvement of health conditions, whether healthy patients, visibly healthy patients or sick ones.

In 1947, the World Health Organisation (WHO) defined health as an integral state in which quality of life is contemplated: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not just the lack of disease or pain...”

Health Tourism or Health and Tourism, according to the Cuban approach, embodies the dynamics and peculiar characteristics that reflect the export and commercialisation of a service that is simultaneous because it is consumed at the time of production. It is variable because it depends on the person, the place where it is being offered and who is offering and providing it, and requires the fundamental link with the user during production. The user, in this case the patient, is essential; his* participation is required in order for the supplier or provider of the service to consider his needs and to adapt them to the particular case. In Cuba, this has resulted in the creation of an integral, interdisciplinary, investigative, scientific, professional and humane approach which has made the Cuban alternative, in matters of health, a unique and exclusive example in many of its treatments and actual results.

The commercialisation of Health Tourism, in the export of special services, has met several peculiarities and obstacles. The fact that Health Tourism can only be ‘exported’ once there is demand for it has a bearing

*For the sake of conciseness, the masculine form has been used to denote patients of either gender



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Health tourism in Cuba combines advanced medical care with total immersion in Cuban culture and society

on the execution of this activity in the world, and we have also experienced difficulties related to this factor in Cuba, especially from the technical and commercial perspective. All these difficulties are also experienced by patients who search for a solution to their health problems beyond their borders.

The main obstacles to the execution of Health Tourism include:

1. A lack of uniform information between the patient and the health service provider. The patient is unaware of the complexity of the disease he suffers from and of the treatments available; he does not have enough time to analyse the situation in detail or to make decisions on consumption, which leads them to having to trust alternatives or specialists, who, with knowledge of the problem and its treatment may dictate a possible strategy.

2. Financial concerns and fears. Due to the lack of information, uncertainty is created in the patient as a consumer, because he is unable to quantify the totality of the expense, the characteristics of the disease, the probabilities, the prognosis, the variability, the available therapies, the effectiveness of these therapies and the quality of the service provider.

3. The quality of the health service. As a service, it is impossible for the client to attest to the quality of the product being offered before actually trying it out. This adds to the uncertainty and depends on the process itself, and on the results that he experiences as a specific patient, together with the veracity and excellence of the service that will show a definite result.

4. The combination of a heterogeneous product with heterogeneous priorities and preferences. Services are heterogeneous; the same service is different every time it is rendered and if the patient as a consumer is not satisfied with his choice, it is not possible to return it. Also, the consumer demands different types of services that go beyond intentions of improving his health, they manifest as preferences for certain specialists, specific care, the location where the treatment will be received, international acknowledgement and criteria, the expectations that are part of the service, technology, etc.

Our experience in the development of Cuba as a tourist destination in the Caribbean has always taken into account the planned and basic desire to guarantee the wellbeing of the tourist who arrives on the island; placing this tourist in a framework of complete integration with his treatment and enjoyment of a peaceful, healthy and safe destination, interacting with

the environment and in contact with our culture and society, and thus defining our offering and concept of total wellbeing as a destination in every way.

Looking at the tourist as an independent entity, removed from the socio-cultural context in which he develops as a person, stripping him of his status as a social being, would be to consider him as merchandise. Therefore, whether it is the conventional tourist or the patient that travels to receive a health service within the international alternative of health offered by Cuba, it will always be our number one priority to guarantee his wellbeing, allowing him to enjoy our beautiful beaches, our ancient cities and the happiness of the Cuban people without threats to his integrity and with the certainty that he will receive a good quality of life.

A lot remains to be done and new concepts define our activity. Without a doubt, Health and Tourism are entwined in the Cuban reality. The necessity to improve the concepts of quality in the thorough care of the patient is more perceptible day by day, and should address the disease, his stay in the country, seeing him and his family as important guests, with a personalised and integrated approach. Even though for some on this planet a patient, a sick person, a disabled person, is not a tourist, for us welcoming him, treating him and looking after him from the point of view that goes beyond the doctor-clinic-patient approach is a priority. It contributes to his achievement of the perception or sensation of being a special guest, a condition that comforts and reinstates, in part, his social status even when sick; a state that will allow him always to be indebted and full of gratitude and looking forward to a quick and safe return. ■

