

Arab Medical Tourism in Germany

Mainz-Dr. Ala Al-Hamarneh

Medical tourism is becoming an important part of international tourism. The term "medical tourism" describes a growing industry where people from all around the world travel to other countries to obtain medical, dental, and surgical care while at the same time exploring the attractions of the countries visited.

There are many reasons for the increase in and popularity of medical tourism: first, the high cost of healthcare in industrialized and some other nations; second, the rapid and continuous improvements in innovative treatment technologies in selected countries; third, the low standards of healthcare and the lack of up-to-date medical infrastructure in many developing countries. The ease and affordability of international travel for relatively large numbers of people and the global flow of information play a central role in the boom of medical tourism.

Medical tourism is mainly an inter-regional activity. Countries like Hungary and the Czech Republic are attracting medical tourists from Germany and Austria who want to pay less mainly for dental treatment and plastic surgery. Countries like Jordan and Tunisia are attracting Arab medical tourists due to their good healthcare standards. Language, traditions and social values play an important role in intra-regional medical tourism.

The United States of America used to attract many Arab medical tourists, especially from Arab Gulf countries. The situation changed dramatically after the terror attacks in New York in 2001. Visa restrictions sometimes accompanied by anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric and attitudes strongly affected the number of Arab tourists. Observers estimate that turnover in American healthcare dropped in 2002 and 2003 by about fifty percent from a previous \$1.4 billion in 2000. That means that treatments worth up to \$700 million annually were either not carried out or re-located outside the USA. The facts



Medias Clinic in Ransgach-Baumbach

عيادة ميدياس في رانشباخ – باومباخ

suggest that this dramatic drop is causally connected with the decreasing number of Muslim and Arab patients.

In contrast, Germany is attracting more and more Arab medical tourists. The development can be seen as part of a general improvement of the economic and political relationship between Germany and Arab countries. The image of Germany was further enhanced due to its anti-war policy during the last Iraqi crises. "Made in Germany" has always been a symbol and guarantee of high quality in the Arab World. Medical tourism in Germany is based on the

quality of medical treatments: renowned research institutions, comfortable hospitals, innovative technologies and highly-qualified medical personnel. A well established network of service agencies rounds out the infrastructure of medical tourism. The service agencies provide visa and logistical assistance, multilingual and translation assistance, all-around treatment, accounting and insurance services, VIP and security facilities, and traditional tourist and travel services. Such agencies are available all over the country. Some of them, like the Berlin-based GermanCare, have ➤



The Simssee Klinik in south Bavaria

عيادة سيمسي في جنوب بافاريا

developed web sites in Arabic and a network of representatives throughout the Arab World.

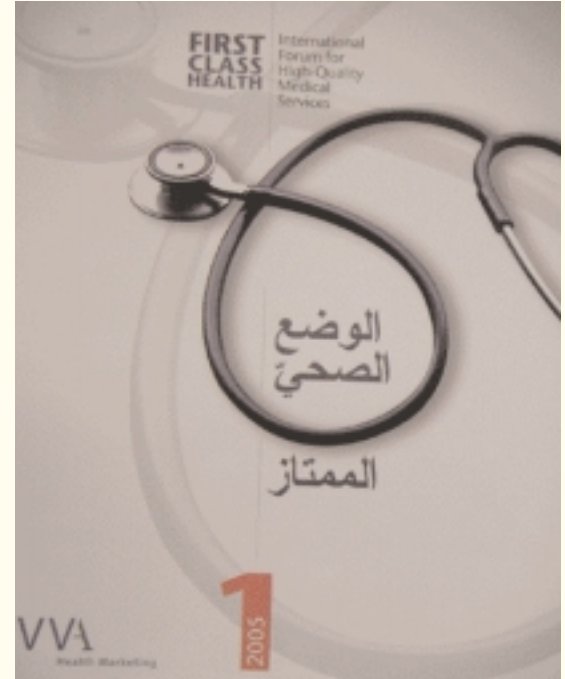
The promotion of Germany worldwide as a medical service provider is partially coordinated by the Committee for the Promotion of German Medicine Abroad. The major aim of the committee is "to foster international dialogue on medical care by providing specialist information and to promote the advanced level of medical care found in German hospitals". The committee established in 1988 is a permanent guest at medical and healthcare fairs and events in the Arab World. The Arab Health Fair, which takes place annually in Dubai, is the focal point for marketing and promotion of medical tourism in the region.

Another body that has a long tradition in promoting healthcare and medicine is the Essen-based VVA Health Marketing, which belongs to the Düsseldorf-based Vereinigte Verlagsanstalten Communication group. The VVA has two well-established, practice-orientated medical publications in Arabic, the "Arab Medico" and the "Arab Dental". Recently VVA brought to the market a new promotion-

oriented periodical in Arabic, "First Class Health".

Arab and Eastern European countries are the main international clients of German medical services. Arab patients and their families are looking for a combination of high quality medical treatment, privacy and leisure time activities. Privacy is provided by excellent standards of confidentiality and security. Many of the medical centers and hospitals are located in picturesque areas like the Taunus Mountains, the Rhine Valley, southern Bavaria and the Black Forest. For those who want to explore urban spaces, the hospitals and clinics of the metropolitan areas and big cities have excellent facilities and specialists.

The most popular treatments requested by Arab patients are plastic surgery, physical therapy and treatment of heart disease, infertility and orthopedic problems. While the patients of cosmetic medicine are looking primarily for privacy and high quality in small private clinics and medical resorts, the cardiology and gynecology patients are mainly to be found in the huge medical centers attached to medical faculties and colleges in big cities. Arab patients are



The cover of new medical periodical غلاف مجلة طبية

often accompanied by family members and friends. In the summer season many Arab families combine vacation with medical treatment, especially if the patient does not need urgent and/or risky treatment. Hotels, furnished apartments and luxurious villas are offered by healthcare agencies and traditional real-estate agents. The exact numbers of Arab patients in Germany is not known, but the boom of support agencies, advertisement activities and participation in medical fairs and events reflects the increase in the numbers of patients and revenues.

Medical tourism was for a long time a privilege of individual wealthy patients in developed countries, characterised by sanatoriums for tuberculosis patients in Switzerland or rheumatism sufferers in Italy. Medical tourists are becoming a new target group. Many potential patients in countries with high-cost healthcare are looking for cheaper services in other countries, while well-off patients worldwide are looking for the best treatment in the most comfortable and secure atmosphere. Germany is indeed one of the best addresses in the world for high quality in medical services and hospitality. More and more well-off Arab patients are taking advantage of German offers. ■