Interview with Christos Petsides, General Director, Cyprus Health Services Promotions Board

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What were the reasons behind the creation of the Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board in 2006 and what have been the main priorities since it was set up?

The increasing expansion of medical tourism over the years has raised the need to establish an organisation whose main concern would be to place Cyprus on the global medical tourism map by means of a variety of initiatives and actions. The Medical Board was established by the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry and has been working closely with the Cyprus Tourism Organisation and the Ministry of Commerce Industry and Tourism in order to fulfil its goals. Its members are hospitals, clinics, medical doctors and other stakeholders of the medical tourism sector of Cyprus.

Cyprus is a well- known tourist destination in the Mediterranean region and its tourism sector plays a vital role in the economy of the country. All these years, the success of Cyprus was based on the sea and sun concept- the beautiful weather, the nice beaches and the luxurious accommodation. However, Cyprus is not only sea and sun. It is also an Island with history and culture. It has all these so-called “special interests” for tourists, and medical tourism is part of that.

In this direction the Cyprus Tourism Organisation has launched a new strategy for the promotion of medical tourism with the support of the Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board

For many years the private hospitals and clinics of Cyprus have worked mainly with local patients. The Medical Board now has to undertake the task of promoting and investing in introducing the idea of the Health Tourism within local structures.

All medical establishments are approved and licensed by the Cyprus Government and some of them have moved a step ahead by signing contracts to obtain international accreditation standards

from accrediting bodies approved by the ISQUA. There are a number of clinics which are in the process of obtaining international accreditation in the next two to three years. This will upgrade the image of Cyprus as a Health Tourism Destination at the same time will improve the services provided to all patients.
In order to start promoting Cyprus abroad we organised three conferences. The UK was our main target as Britain represents our highest income from tourism. We started promoting Cyprus as a medical destination and centre of excellence in Britain. Now we also participate in several tourist exhibitions: WTM in London, ITB in Berlin, and other exhibitions in the Middle East as well as international and European Conferences, related to medical tourism

Most patients today come from the UK as you mentioned, but also from Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, the Middle East and Greece. Nearly five years after the creation of the Board, could you share with our readers the main figures and statistics?

Actual figures are not yet available as medical tourism is a new segment of our tourist industry. However there is an increase of requests of patients to visit Cyprus for dental services, cosmetics surgeries, fertility techniques (IVF) and a vast range of other medical treatments.
According to some British websites, Cyprus ranks among the top destinations for British patients, especially for dental and cosmetics treatments.

What would you say are the core competitive advantages of Cyprus as a medical tourism destination?

First of all, medical tourism is a combination of the tourist industry and the medical sector. As for the tourist sector, we are already an established destination with good infrastructure and broad knowledge in the field. In addition, there is an excellent medical infrastructure with well-equipped, technologically sophisticated hospitals and clinics with highly qualified specialist consultants, doctors, nurses and technical staff. Cyprus has very high standards of hygiene and as I have already mentioned a number of private hospitals are already in the process of obtaining international accreditation. The English language is well spoken in Cyprus and this helps the patients have direct contact with the staff. All these factors make Cyprus a very attractive medical tourism destination.

The “cross border healthcare” law of the EU, and the recent incentives of the Cypriot Government have definitely ensured growth and improvement in the health tourism services sector in Cyprus. However, your country is not yet on the top of the “medical tourism” world map. What are the most important steps that still need to be taken and improvements that need to made?

Cyprus is an EU member since 2004 which ensures that all necessary EU directives have been introduced and incorporated into national legislation. It is also in the Euro zone which allows patients to easily estimate their expenditures. We have very good prices which are very competitive

with most of the European countries and a unique position at the continental crossroads between Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, making itself easily accessible for all people whether these coming from Europe or the rest of the world. We will continue to upgrade our services and our promotion worldwide.

Cyprus is definitely a destination of choice for travellers who enjoy culture, good weather and the variety of touristic sites proposed. But what probably matters most to patients is the quality of treatments and more than anything, safety. What has been done by your members and at your level, to guarantee state of the art facilities and treatment? And how are the Authorities ensuring that the highest levels of safety are guaranteed?

As I have already motioned, as a member of the EU all necessary EU directives have been introduced and incorporated into national legislation.
Cyprus is not in the 1970s or 1980s anymore, so the health services of the country have been upgraded and now there are organised hospitals, clinics and polyclinics.
Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board as part of its activities organises seminars and lectures for the managers of hospitals, promoting the idea that Cyprus' private hospitals must seek to reach international standards and new methods of management

Another critical success factor for a "health destination" is the medical body. How do you ensure Cyprus attracts and trains at the highest standard and level specialist consultants, doctors, nurses, and technical staff?

The Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board is not the only stakeholder and such an association as the one of doctors and clinics has to play this role with its members as well. According to our knowledge, the standards in Cyprus today are very high. All Cypriot doctors have been trained overseas in the UK, the USA, Greece, Germany, France and we are expecting to have our own first medical school in 2013. For so many years, our doctors and nurses studied abroad. They all speak foreign languages which is an added benefit to the services offered.
In 2008, investments in new buildings accounted for €19.5 million and €15.5 million in machinery and equipment. Cyprus is looking at further developing and modernizing its medical infrastructure.

What role can foreign investors and partnerships with local operators play in this regard?

Several projects in the field of medical tourism are in process. Some hoteliers are revamping their hotels so as to accommodate rehabilitation centres. In the same way, some entrepreneurs are reorganising areas within hotels, rehabilitation centres, medical wellness centres and villas.
Cyprus is open to investments and the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry, organises business forums in several countries to promote Cyprus as a business centre.

With modern medicines and treatments requiring a high level of investment, and Cyprus only boasting a limited population, can the development of medical tourism benefit the local population?

It is an important topic because when Cyprus upgrades its services to attract medical tourists in Cyprus, it is not only for foreigners but also for locals. If our hotels and hospitals start upgrading their services and offerings, getting international standards, it will apply not only to international tourists but also to Cypriot citizens.

What is your final message about how Cyprus is well poised to become a significant health destination?

I would like to say that Cyprus for many years has proven that it is a country which knows how to welcome all tourists who want to have a good time. Why not consider coming to Cyprus and having treatment that would combine a holiday and a medical treatment?
This is something that we offer in Cyprus.
I would also like to say that, when we promote Cyprus as a medical tourism destination, we do not mean that Cyprus is only for patients who have cancer, or need open-heart surgeries…. Cyprus also offers IVF, dental, and cosmetic treatments. Tourists on a long stay can decide to have their check up done here if they wish to and it is certainly much cheaper than most other European countries. We know exactly how to treat people in Cyprus.

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