



# **Empowering Resilience through Medical Tourism: Addressing Economic Challenges in Healthcare Systems of Sanction-Affected Nations**

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## **Dear Editor-in-Chief**

Economic sanctions have widespread negative impacts on healthcare systems, causing significant issues such as shortages of medicine and medical equipment as well as rising treatment costs. The skyrocketing cost of healthcare can lead to a decline in service quality and inequalities in access to medical care, ultimately putting public health at serious risk. This letter aimed to introduce and emphasize medical tourism as a resilience strategy to improve the economic stability of healthcare systems in sanctioned countries.

Evidence suggests that economic sanctions impose multiple detrimental effects on nations' healthcare systems. The financial burden following sanctions has led to higher medical costs, which in turn have limited people's access to healthcare, especially for those from low-income and underprivileged groups, thus exacerbating poverty, a key social determinant of health (SDH) (1). In addition, economic pressure following sanctions results in a decline in healthcare quality and increased mortality rates for chronic conditions. For instance, in Iran, sanctions have led to shortages of essential medications and medical

equipment, further deepening healthcare access disparities (2). Furthermore, since 2022, the European Union and the United States have imposed substantial sanctions against Russia, mainly targeting economic and trade sectors. These sanctions also include restrictions on exporting pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, as well as limitations on conducting clinical trials in Russia. Although these sanctions aimed to diminish Russia's military capabilities, they have had a limited impact on military operations. Additionally, they have inadvertently affected civilians and injured soldiers by causing shortages of vital medicines and medical supplies in Russian hospitals, potentially violating their human rights (3).

Medical tourism entails international travel with the primary purpose of accessing medical services, often driven by factors such as lower healthcare costs, enhanced accessibility, or reduced waiting times in the host country. This industry, having experienced substantial growth over recent years, possesses the potential to mitigate economic pressures on the healthcare system by generating foreign exchange earnings through



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the attraction of international patients. Moreover, these earnings can be utilized to enhance healthcare infrastructure and invest in innovative technologies in medical services, such as the metaverse. The integration of the metaverse into healthcare delivery can enhance accessibility to medical care while reducing associated costs. Furthermore, it can facilitate the provision of medical care to international patients, thereby contributing to the financial advancement of the healthcare system in the host country (4).

In this regard, Turkey and Lebanon can be highlighted as two nations facing sanctions, where their developed medical tourism sectors have significantly contributed to strengthening their healthcare systems financially. According to the Overall Medical Tourism Index (MTI) 2020, Turkey secured the 30<sup>th</sup> position while Lebanon was ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> among the top medical tourism destinations (5). Turkey has successfully drawn numerous medical tourists by providing affordable healthcare services and modern facilities, resulting in a substantial increase in foreign exchange earnings for its healthcare system. Furthermore, despite economic challenges, Lebanon has managed to secure a substantial share of the medical tourism market, generating new funding for its hospitals and medical centers. This success can be attributed to its skilled healthcare professionals and, more significantly, its relatively affordable treatment costs compared to those in Europe and the United States.

The economic sanctions adversely affect the health systems of countries, hindering their ability to meet Sustainable Development Goals for Health and Universal Health Coverage, governments and health system leaders in sanctioned nations must consider medical tourism as a sustainable strategy for enhancing the resilience of their healthcare systems. Additionally, they are advised to implement supportive policies, improve infrastructure, and offer suitable facilities

to capture a larger share of this promising and profitable market. Furthermore, it is recommended that international organizations focusing on improving public health and human rights should be invited to offer financial, technical, and scientific assistance to sanctioned countries to develop their medical tourism industry. This support can help enhance the healthcare system in these nations and ensure that politics do not prevent anyone from accessing their right to health, leaving no one behind.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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