

Forms and types of medical tourism in dentistry in the Czech Republic in 2008



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Content

1	Target and methodology of the research	3
2	Summary of dental tourism in the Czech Republic	5
3	Number of dentists in the Czech Republic and the capacity for treatment of foreign patients	7
4	Forms of medical tourism in dentistry	9
4.1	More expensive treatments in the field of implantology, prosthetics and aesthetic dentistry.....	9
4.2	Cross-border dental care	10
4.3	Dental care associated with another stay in the Czech Republic	11
5	Foreign patients and their motives to come	12
6	Information channels – how do foreigners find out about Czech dentists?.....	15
7	Risks connected with dental tourism	17
8	Will the interest of foreign patients in dental care in the Czech Republic increase?	19
	Research was done by.....	20

1 Target and methodology of the research

The submitter of the research “Forms and types of medical tourism in dentistry in the Czech Republic in 2008” is an Internet portal www.cosmetic-plastic-surgery.info.

The target of the research was to get a overview about **medical tourism in the area of dentistry and its types and forms.**

The research has been finding out for example:

- Type of treatments that foreign patients undertake in the Czech Republic
- Most often performed treatments within dental tourism
- What is typical patient like that comes to the Czech Republic for dental treatment and how does he/she finds out about the care in the Czech Republic
- Countries from which dental patients come to Czech Republic
- Reasons why people come to the Czech Republic because of dental treatments
- Risks connected with cross-border dental care and others.

Data collection has been done at the end of 2008 and beginning of 2009 in form of deep expert interviews with selected dentists. On one hand there have been interviewed surgeons that are directly aimed on foreign patients on the other hand also surgeons with foreign patients that form only a small part of their clientele or patients that reject foreign dental tourism. Among the interviewed, there were also **the vice president of the Czech Dental Chamber and the foreman of the Czech Society for Dental Surgery.**

There has been done in total **11 deep interviews**, mainly personally or by phone. The results of the research cannot be generalized for the whole segment of dental tourism in the Czech Republic although the deep expert interviews have given us general idea about how does this market functions and its level.

The data have been evaluated and the whole research has been made by agency Vyzkumy Soukup (www.vyzkumysoukup.cz) that deals with marketing, demographic and social studies.

In this study, there have been used citations from performed interviews. To keep it anonymous we do not state the names of the respondents though. We put here **brief characteristic of the interviewed persons** so that the reader would get an idea of the addressed answerers and their reasons for their answers and attitudes.

Surgeon num.1: Chief surgeon of private clinic that offers complete care in the field of aesthetic medicine including dental care. The clinic has many branches including offices abroad and it directly specializes on the treatment of foreign patients. It treats 5 thousand foreign patients every year. According to words of the interviewed surgeon there is no other clinic that would treat so many foreigners like this clinic.

Surgeon num.2: Chief surgeon of Prague Dental Center aimed at providing very specialized preventive, diagnostic and healing care. Although the foreign patients are not actively sought, about 10% of the patients are foreigners.

Surgeon num.3: Dentist, his office is aimed at cosmetic dentistry. He treats approximately 10 foreign patients per year, he does not search for them actively.

Surgeon num.4: Chief surgeon of private dental clinic with 15 years of experience, that treats annually about several hundreds of foreign patients.

Surgeon num.5: Chief surgeon of implantology clinic, the percentage of foreign patients is 10%.

Surgeon num.6: One of the most experienced implantologists in the Czech Republic, his experience is aimed only on implants. He tries to avoid foreign patients; he treats about 3% of foreigners.

Surgeon num.7: Private experience with oral, jaw and facial surgery, he is not aimed at foreign patients and he treats only several of them every year.

Surgeon num.8: Private dental office, he treats almost no foreign patients.

Surgeon num.9: Chief surgeon of Prague Dental Clinic. He cooperates with agency that provides contacts on Czech dentists to foreign patients; he treats only minimum of foreign clients though.

Surgeon num.10: Dental studio in spa city that treats also foreign patients.

Surgeon num.11: Chief surgeon and instructor of specialized institute, chief surgeon of dental clinic with approximately 30% rate of foreign patients.

2 Summary of dental tourism in the Czech Republic

Medical tourism in the Czech Republic is less developed and rather unorganized. The dental tourism in the Czech Republic is not systematically supported neither on the level of government programs or incentives nor by the dentists, medical centers or private clinics. There is a minimum of surgeons that specialize on the foreign patients and in most of the cases Czech dentists do not search actively for foreign patients. Low developed medical tourism is confirmed also by the fact that according to most of the addressed surgeons the most foreign patients come because of personal recommendation of another patient. Only a few surgeons have elaborated system of searching foreign patients.

The addressed dentists say that compared to for example situation in Poland or Hungary the Czech Republic is in the field of dental tourism rather a Cinderella. It cannot be said though that people do not travel for the dental treatments. On contrary. For example, German or British patients are used to travelling a lot for dental treatments.

Surgeon num.1 adds: *“...patients from Germany travel for dental treatments for three and a half milliard of Euros per year...Poland is based on German patients...Hungarians have elaborated systems with state guarantees...”*

The addressed dentists have agreed that **typical destinations**, where patients travel for dental treatments are **Hungary and Poland**.

Why is that? Why medical tourists do not come also to the Czech Republic? The opinions vary. In general public there is an impression of lack of dentists, so there is no room for foreign patients. Most of the addressed dentists deny it with reference to over-average number of dentists per 1000 inhabitants (see chapter 3).

Probably the main reason of lower number of medical tourists is the fact that **not many dentists specialize on this field and they do not actively seek the foreign patients**. It can be caused by many reasons, from unawareness of the possibility to rejection of foreign clients in principle. Among other problems belongs legislative and non-existing system of certification or missing possibility to verify the surgeon's attestation. Complaints of badly performed dental procedures are very complicated for the foreigners and so far there is no possibility in the Czech Republic to simply verify that the chosen surgeon has needed education and attestation. The Czech state also does not actively support dental tourism and

therefore there are no systematic precautions that would start this market or support it (not even in the informative point of view).

Health tourism in the dentistry in the Czech Republic can be divided in principal in several types. The oldest is probably the **cross-border** dental care. It traditionally involves especially common dental treatments. In the last years has increased the number of more complicated treatments. Second type is dental care performed for example as a part of stay in **spa** or vacation. The third type is treatments offered “inland”. In most of the cases those are expensive difficult treatments. Another forms are then mass tours for dental care done by agencies or accidental individual dental treatment that overcome in long lasting cooperation. Surgeons and private clinics also sometimes cooperate with foreign agencies that actively search clients for them abroad (especially for more expensive treatments) and they are paid by a certain percentage of the price of performed treatments. From made interviews with the surgeons it has been showed that these last two types (mass tours and agencies) are not very common.

Foreigners come to the Czech republic mostly for treatments that are more expensive, especially from the field of **implantology and prosthetics**. Even though these large treatments need repeated visits, it is **financially worth it** for the foreign patients to travel to the Czech Republic. Price is also the most frequent reason why do foreign tourists come to the Czech Republic. The addressed dentists have agreed on the fact that Czech dental care is of comparable quality with abroad, the prices are much better for foreigners though.

How is a **typical medical tourist** in dentistry? Respondents have agreed that those are people of middle group that have enough money for more expensive treatments but still the price is important for them and so they are able to travel abroad for the treatment to save money.

Opinions on **further development** of dental tourism in the Czech republic differ. One group of surgeons says that the interest in the Czech Republic of the foreigners will decrease. It will be caused by gradual price adjusting, lack of support from state and legislative problems with possible reimbursement. The other group says that the interest of foreigners will increase because they will find out that they get the same quality for substantially better price. It is a fact that the market with dental tourism is not at present very developed and that's why there is a room for its systematic expansion.

3 Number of dentists in the Czech Republic and the capacity for treatment of foreign patients

According to the newest data of Czech Dental Chamber¹ in 2007 there were **7048 dentists** in the Czech Republic that were active. **So there belonged in average 1 468 patients for one dentist.** The Czech Dental Chamber assumes that the number of dentists will start to decrease from 2008 because at present there are 63% of active dentists older than 50 years old. It is assumed that the number of dentists that will be retired will be higher than the number of young dentists who will start to work.

So is there a capacity in the Czech Republic to treat foreigners?

The phenomenon of last years in the Czech Republic are warning messages that the dentistry is close to a crisis. The dentists are retired and new dentists cannot fully replace them with their lower number. One of the themes of the research has also been the capacity of dentists for treatment of foreign patients.

The respondents have agreed that Czech dentists still have capacity for treatment of foreign patients. Not only for expensive and more difficult procedures but also for common dental care.

For instance the addressed surgeon num. 11, who has a private dental clinic and who's patients are in 30% foreign patients says: *"...I think that Czech dentistry lacks of higher efficiency and there are not too little Czech dentists. It has always been talked about the decreasing number of dentists and showed some graphs and numbers about the level of number of patients per one dentist in the Czech Republic. On the other hand if you compare it there is approximately 1500 or 1600 patients for one dentist in the Czech Republic and in Austria there is over 2000 patients for one dentist. In Switzerland it is around 1700. Those are much higher numbers in Austria and Switzerland than in the Czech Republic and nobody there warns that new dental schools should be opened and more students should be accepted. Because the kind of model, where there works one nurse, one dentist on one seat,*

¹ Source: Document published by the Czech Dental Chamber and is available on http://www.dent.cz/img_data/file/Czech_2008.pdf.

is not too effective. The dentist has lots of idle time during the treatment. And I also think that there is still some left capacity for the treatment of patients among Czech dentists.”

Another surgeon (num.1) says: *“There are for sure capacities. They just say that there is not enough dentists because in the Czech Republic we have the most dentists in the world.”*

Surgeons dealing with dental-surgical treatments

Most of the foreign patients in the Czech Republic come for dental-surgical treatments – implantology, prosthetics and so on. According to the data of the Czech Dental Chamber there were registered in the Czech Republic **457 surgeons working in dental surgery or oral and maxillofacial surgery**. The addressed dentists have agreed though that Czech dentists still have capacities for satisfying the demand of foreign patients.

4 Forms of medical tourism in dentistry

Dental tourism in the Czech Republic has several forms. Based on a qualitative research made among the selected dentists we can divide them in:

- Financially (and often even time) consuming treatments that are undertaken in the Czech Republic mainly because of their good price
- Cross-border dental care that involved in the past especially common dental treatments, in last period some dentists orientate also on more difficult treatments
- Dental care for which patients come within another program – for example stay at spa, vacation, job trips etc.
- Individual accidental dental treatment that can but doesn't have to lead to long lasting cooperation
- Dental care provided to foreigners that live permanently in the Czech Republic. According to the addressed surgeons it is in no way different from the care provided to the Czechs though (with the exception of possible need to communicate in another language).

Worldwide we can also find form of so-called mass medical tourism, when specialized agencies bring in the given country whole buses (or even planes) of patients and they provide for them as a bonus to medical care also complete service including accommodation and other services. We can find this form of health tourism also in the Czech Republic (typical specialty where this system functions is plastic surgery). Although in the given research only one of the interviewed surgeons has mentioned it. Some surgeons can on the request of the foreign patient also book accommodation and other services, it is not a systematic activity though.

4.1 More expensive treatments in the field of implantology, prosthetics and aesthetic dentistry

The most common dental treatments undertaken by foreigners in the Czech Republic are treatments in the field of implantology, prosthetics and aesthetic dentistry – those are

treatments that are worth it for foreigners even with higher costs connected with travelling or accommodation. Usually those are repeated visits. Regarding the fact that medical tourism in the Czech Republic is not too developed so one of the most frequent source of information is personal recommendation of present clients. The addressed dentists agree that so-called snowball, rolling contacts, works really well in this field. Satisfied client brings his/her acquaintances, friends and family.

The addressed dentist num.11 says: *“In my case foreign patients come to my office from 95% based on personal recommendation. I don’t even use any marketing instruments such as Internet or any advertisements in the newspapers and so on. We’ve got leaflets here in our office, where is a list of treatments and services that we provide. Some patients take these leaflets and give them to their other friends. So more or less there are always leaflets and some oral references...”*

4.2 Cross-border dental care

In the Czech Republic it is normal that dentists with their office in border area have many patients that also live not far from the border. The respondents have agreed that it is not such a gold mine like in the nineties, when many dentists got a lot of money on that” (mentions for example surgeon num.1). Nowadays price difference of common care is not so big so the number of cross-border patients gradually decreases.

Cross-border dental care today consists of common dental care (but in smaller extent) and also of difficult treatments in the field of implantology and prosthetics. Today the dentists near border do not search for foreign patients actively but they often come themselves on the base of personal recommendation. There are also private clinics with specialization on the foreign patients and providing them complete service including accommodation and services, those are obviously only individual cases.

The surgeon num.8 adds to it: *“I know one dental office, which is specialized directly on foreign patients, at Sumava...There is an office with specialization directly on the foreign clients, where patients come from Austria ...”*

4.3 Dental care associated with another stay in the Czech Republic

Another type of dental tourism in the Czech Republic is dental care associated with other activities in the Czech Republic. Typically stay at spa or less often vacation or job trips.

According to addressed surgeons those are especially Marianske lazne and Carlsbad. In the spa area those are mainly older patients that have their complete dental care done (although without larger treatments) or patients that plan for example implant placement or bridge or ceramic veneers etc.

The addressed surgeon num.1 from one of the big clinics that specializes on treatment of foreign patients says: *“In Karlovy Vary and Marianske lazne our offices take care only of foreign patients... Typical clients in Marianske lazne is then 70+.”*

5 Foreign patients and their motives to come

Most frequent foreign patients of the Czech dentists are the **British, Russians, Germans and Austrians**. Other nationalities are Swiss, Italians and others. The addressed dentists have agreed that they belong to the **middle group of population** that already have quite a lot of money to be able to afford expensive treatments. On the other hand the price is still important for them so they travel abroad because of the price. The most frequent motivation of arrival is **financial saving** regarding the comparable quality of treatment. Other motives are **better quality of the care**, which is seen especially by the British clients. Certain specific is a choice of particular dentist that has already worked for example for some celebrity.

We can quote here for instance surgeon num.5 that states: *“The biggest reason is for sure finances. Dental care in the Czech Republic is incomparable less expensive than in other countries in Europe and on very good level. The second thing is then quality. If I would say it in general **patients from England come more because of quality and from German speaking countries especially because of finances. Dental care in England is of very low quality and there are surgeons of various nationalities and I think that they do not seem very trustful for people there.**”*

Surgeon num.1 states: *“...people fly to Prague from greater distances for large treatments, where the financial difference is still very big. It is for example Great Britain or Russia...**Many Russian dentists still don't have good technologies and those who have them put their prices three times higher than in Prague. In Moscow it is substantially more expensive than in Prague.**”*

One of the agencies that brings patients from Great Britain to the Czech Republic invites on its web pages dental tourists to the Czech Republic this way: *“Eastern Europe has been on the top level in the dental care since many years and the surgeons at the clinic are among the best and most qualified in Prague... The clinic selects carefully its surgeons. They have experience and specialized qualification on the top level.”* They also show specific price list of procedures.

Another agency **compares directly prices of for example implant in the Great Britain and abroad** and mentions **up to 70% saving** on one implant (it is in particular 1 145 pounds, i.e. about 36 thousand Czech crowns on one implant compared to price in London). If an

adult considers replacement of half teeth with implants, he would save **more than a half a million crowns** compared to London prices!).

What's the difference between the foreign and Czech patient? Especially by his/her attitude to dental care and prevention. The addressed surgeons say that foreign patients are usually more informed about the treatments, they actively look for information about the treatment's process, possible complications and so on. From the point of view of the foreign patient is the interest obvious. Foreign patient leaves for a complicated treatment abroad, covers not only the whole treatment but has to count also with other costs for journey, accommodation, services etc. Although the patient saves a lot of money compared to prices in his/her country, he must be aware that in case of treatment with complications or badly performed treatment it would be really hard to get some money from the surgeon. To be more informed means for the foreign patient to avoid potential complications or dissatisfaction.

Foreign patients also know that they have to pay for dental care. Czech patient often assumes that everything must be for free within a public medical insurance and therefore hesitates more about paying for extra procedures.

Surgeon num.5 adds to it: *“There is a big difference between Czech and foreign client in their behaviour. The Czech client is used to take what the surgeon offers, the foreign client is more picky, negotiates about the possibilities, the method, finances and wants to get maximal quality for the given money. The Czechs are not used to this so much.”*

Surgeon num.11 says: *“I have to say that the biggest difference between the Czech and foreign patients is that the Czech client still hesitates about the planned treatment and thinks – can I afford this, should I do it, do I need to invest in my health or maybe a free treatment would be sufficient, the one that is not of such a quality and often even without any quality. The Czech patient has been for long time taught that health services are for free. We cannot find this in foreign patients. They have been used since long time that from generation to generation that they have take care of their health, teeth and oral cavity. If not it will cost them a lot of money. So they come to the office and they know that they will have to pay for the care and they just decide whether to choose the most expensive or the middle way.”*

Surgeon num.1 has described foreign patients in an interesting way:

“...Clients from Great Britain differ dramatically. A lot of them go just for better prices although it is not a secret that the dentistry in England is of worse quality than in average in the Czech Republic. So rich people come here for the quality because they miss it in England...

...clients from Russia are the richest...it is only the clientele from top. Again very specific – in character. Russians are more sensitive and emotional. German patients represent a dream of a surgeon that is not so precise. They let him work, they are very disciplined. If the surgeon says that they should do something they do it. The Russians would not.”

6 Information channels – how do foreigners find out about Czech dentists?

Among the addressed dentists we have seen the use of following information channels. Their effectiveness depends in great extent on a particular setting and the quality of individual channels:

1. To perform enrolment of foreign clients **via own offices abroad**. This possibility is the most difficult but also the most successful.
2. The use of services of **specialized agencies** that advertise Czech surgeons on their own costs abroad and they get commission for each client from the price of treatment. Surgeon num.9, which has a contract with such an agency says: *“The agency advertise on its web pages any clinic or dental treatment wherever. The client then contacts us through the agency – then it’s the agency who contacts us – or directly. And then it depends on the agreement with the agency. The agency then receives certain percentage from the treatment.”*
3. Actively seek for foreign clients via **Internet** (target on key words, presentations in foreign languages etc.). Many Czech dentists have their presentations in foreign languages but they do not bring too many patients. To attract foreigners on the pages it is necessary to make active Internet campaign either in form of search engine optimization or in form of prepaid positions on the search engines.
4. To rely upon a **personal recommendation** of satisfied patients and to use so-called snow ball or rolling other and other clients on the basis of recommendation. Form of personal recommendation is **at present the most used way** of dentist’s “propagation”. (For example surgeon num.5: *“ The most often is personal recommendation of our existing clients or from Czech emigrants, the second is Internet.”* Surgeon num.11: *“...in 95 percentage of cases it is based on personal recommendation...”*)

This situation shows that dental tourism in the Czech Republic is not systematically supported and developed and the market is not very developed. In most of the cases there is a systematic approach to gain foreign patients and there are not many agencies that actively work on enrolment of foreign patients in the Czech Republic.

Surgeon num.1, which has probably the biggest experience with enrolment of foreign patients, describes this situation well: *“Primarily you have to find the people. ...At the beginning we were also searching our patients non-professionally as others. As it was typical for the Czechs somewhere in London, they were sending their acquaintances. And it still works like this in nine cases from ten Czech dentists. Some have improved, so they have for example web pages or they pay on German Google and that’s it. But if you imagine the number of clients, the clinic must present their people, have own offices in those countries so the patients are not afraid to judge with you. It is psychologically very important for them that you have a company in Germany that is subjected to German strict rules if something happens and so on...”*

The addressed surgeon num.1 works at the clinic that treats 5 thousand foreign patients every year. Compared to other surgeons that were asked in the research those are completely different numbers. Most of the addressed dentists treat tens of foreigners some hundreds. So it is evident that active enrolment in the country where the dentist wants to get new patients is probably the only way how to increase the number of foreign patients. Why? According to the surgeon num.1 it is caused mainly because of legislative reasons, if the work is not done properly. About these and other risks you can read more in following chapter.

7 Risks connected with dental tourism

Cross border dental care has its risks, from the point of view of the patient and also the surgeon. There are basically two types of risks on both sides – **medical** and **legislative**.

Some surgeons do not even perform more difficult treatment to foreign patients because they fear possible medical complications (for example surgeon num.5: *“In general there is a problem with time and possible complications. If I am not sure that the treatment will be without problem I don’t do it.”*) Others are afraid of possible juridical impacts (for example surgeon num.8: *“Of course the risk is high, if something goes wrong than the juridical impact can be quite significant”*).

From the point of view of patients the medical risk is connected with especially **the speed of performed treatments** and care after the surgery. Often there are performed treatments within the medical tourism that would take even a year in several days. In spite entire pre-surgical preparation and post-surgical care in the client’s country is such a fast treatment very risky.

Surgeon num.1 says: *“...there is a problem in foreign patients that come because of lower price. It is always a compromise because some examinations and treatments in Prague take even a year if they should be performed in perfect way. I can of course do it within two days but there has to be some compromise because the quality then is not the same as if you do it for a year.”*

The clinic where the surgeon num.1 works has really good pre-surgical care though: *“Often we do it this way. In our center abroad, where we examine the patients, there are less qualified surgeons than in Prague. They do all needed examinations for us. We work a lot for English surgeons that also have their offices. The cooperation in England is the best. Those are often dental practitioners that do not have the courage for more difficult dental implants, respectively not more than one.”*

Surgeons also **warn** foreign patients **against visit of unknown surgeon**. *“...the problem that damaged our (the Czech Republic) reputation is that people without qualification do work for foreigners. So sometimes surgeons without attestation perform big surgeries in foreigners. They do not even think that someone could dare it. And no complaint would be efficient in the Czech Republic. Complaints from London, knocking on the door never helps,*

nobody tries Czech offices because it's too complicated. So the fact that the surgeon has no attestation is equal.” (surgeon num.1)

Also surgeon num.11 says: *“I see the biggest risk in the medical tourism for tourists that risk care by unknown surgeon.”*

Surgeon num. 6 also states: *“I think that foreign patients choose quite superficially and they choose such equipment from the cover, the external site... They are more afraid to get the coffee and have nice furniture than to have the procedure done properly because they don't recognize it.”*

In **legislative** field foreign patients have complicated position according to some surgeons. They do not know Czech legislative so they wouldn't probably start the lawsuit themselves. To do so because of badly done treatment they would have to contact a lawyer that offers services to foreigners. It is therefore more advantageous and preferred to contact someone in his/her country that would provide the care in the Czech Republic and also following legislative support.

“...it is crucial to have the office in their country. It means that people rather prefer London office even though we offered them lower prices in case of direct contact through our web pages. ...Like this they have the chance to go somewhere and to complaint somewhere...”
(surgeon num.1)

8 Will the interest of foreign patients in dental care in the Czech Republic increase?

The addressed surgeons have not agreed on that, if the interest of foreign patients in dental treatments in the Czech Republic will increase or decrease.

As risks that will hinder further rise they consider:

- Gradually equal prices
- Lack of support from the state
- Non-existing system of certification
- Legislative difficulty when exercising reimbursement.

Surgeon num.1 for example states: *“ Those are two things – the lack of support from the state, which represents a big problem among countries that give money in it. For instance Hungarian state pays advertisement to their surgeons. It is a great difference to start as a Czech dentist in London or to belong to organized Hungarian dentists... The second thing is that there is no system and certification. Again compared to countries, where we would like to be, such as Germany, Switzerland. There is a strict certification on everything...In other words there should be some system that would help to recognize who is who from the outside. Here you wouldn't find out, not even who's got attestation for what.”*

Factors according to the surgeons that will support the flow of foreign patients:

- Lower prices compared to abroad
- Higher quality of the treatment (especially in comparison with Great Britain)
- At present insufficiently developed system of advertisement and active acquisition of the patients

Research was done by



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