Polis Peratikos – Executive Secretary, Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board



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05.09.2018

Tags: Cyprus, Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board, Medical Tourism, Investment, Healthcare

Polis Peratikos of the Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board leads the operation promoting the healthcare tourism capabilities of Cyprus across the world, notably in the UK and Russia. In this interview he introduces healthcare villages, their scope of operations, and why the time to invest in Cyprus is now.

Could you please introduce the Health Promotion Board and explain the rationale behind creating such an organization?

Given the rapid increase in medical tourism over the past few years, Cyprus saw the opportunity to create an organization that would serve to promote Cyprus' capabilities as a health tourism destination. The Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry took the initiative to form the Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board in 2006, almost 12 years ago now, with the principal aim of accommodating stakeholders across the private health industry—and founding a cluster that would have at its core an intention to promote the island's healthcare capabilities.

We have been very active since our creation, but particularly over the past few years, we have been keen to streamline the organization of business delegations abroad to several countries of interest, including the UK, Russia and the Middle East. Over the course of these missions, we identify potential partners and organize familiarization trips. These trips take the form of hosting interested foreign parties and stakeholders; we take them around the island and act as a reference

point for local and medical information. The ultimate goal is that we strike up effective business relationships and underline the potential of Cyprus as a health tourism destination. Equally, the board is online; we are active on social media, we manage print media materials too, including newsletters, Facebook interactions, etc.

Moreover, we participate in foreign exhibitions. We have been to Manila, and other countries outside Europe, although for the time being our focus is on European entities. We are present at the WTM in London, the ITB in Berlin, as well as other touristic exhibitions that generally maintain a substantial healthcare interest. We do target specialized exhibitions as well and of most importance is the 'Moscow Med Show,' which aligns with our business mission in Russia, and as such, we host a stand during this show. In October this year, we are organizing a forum in Moscow, and we will participate during the show.

Again within the framework of promoting Cyprus, we have been members of the Ukrainian association of medical tourism; and as members of the global medical tourism association, three years ago we signed an MOU with the Russian healthcare travel company.

In essence, the primary focus of the organization is to promote Cyprus as a health tourism destination, not just medical tourism.

How important is health tourism for the island?

Health tourism is crucial for the island's success— as with every other special interest segment of tourism. Generally speaking, we are trying to enlarge the touristic period in Cyprus because currently, we are busy from April to October. We need to extend that period across the year. By enhancing individual forms of tourism, we can also attract people to the island during the winter. This is the main reason for promoting not only health tourism but other types of tourism.

Indeed, there has been an increase in the number of tourists coming to Cyprus for health purposes in general, but mainly for the areas of dental care, IVF, and cosmetic surgery. Concerning demography, the most critical markets recently have been Russia and the UK—because these have been the countries most promoted in the past five years. We look to establish our presence in these markets better.

How would you assess the talent pool for this segment of healthcare?

The standard and quality of staff is very high across the island. As a matter of fact, the first medical school was established in Cyprus was in 2013; therefore, the vast majority of our medical professionals were trained abroad, whether that be the UK, Greece, Germany, and the USA. As a

result, we also indirectly attract foreign patients to Cyprus.

What is your strategy to attract more international talents and innovative treatments?

From the outset, we promoted everything everywhere which is not the most efficient way of developing a new idea! We have since learned to conduct a specific strategy and have nurtured a particular focus on targeted markets across the world, singling out specific treatments. We have concluded that initially, we will target ‘light treatments,’ as well as dental, IVF, cosmetic and wellness treatments. We intend to establish Cyprus as a hub for these sorts of treatments before expanding into other more complicated areas.

In the past two years, we have reported successes. We observe a steady stream of foreign doctors coming to Cyprus to operate on foreign patients. We have made several contacts within the Ministry of Health, and we have managed to simplify the procedure for foreign medical doctors coming to Cyprus to acquire licenses to operate on international patients given that they are not allowed to provide medical services on Cypriot patients. For Americans and Israelis in particular, we see doctors coming to Cyprus, bringing their patients with them whereby they operate, the Cypriot doctors learn from the foreign Doctors expertise. Finally, the patient spends the following month or two rehabilitating and recovering on the island in a hotel or spa.

Where do your members originate?

All of our members are from the private sector, although we have recently managed to involve specific stakeholders from the public sector as well. These members take part in board meetings as they are financial contributors to achieving our goals, including the Cyprus Tourism Organization, and each one of them has their role. We prepare our action plan every December, which the CTO then approves, and they then sponsor all of our actions. The CTO and government are involved in the process and sponsor the majority of our activities.

How will the ‘GESY’ (NHS for Cyprus) project impact health tourism?

We can only expect the positive consequences of this project because by having a national health care system, we are in a better position to promote ourselves abroad. The impact will also bring more investments and underline our intention to modernize the entire healthcare system.

Concerning new projects for the Health Promotion Board, we have several big ideas that await government approval—they center around healthcare villages. Healthcare villages is the term we use to describe locations that will accommodate hospitals, cooperation and rehabilitation centers, hotels and spas. We hope these projects to receive all required licenses soon to be able to begin

constructing facilities.

Why is now the right moment to come to Cyprus for healthcare support?

It is not only now! Cyprus has been the ideal place for investment for an extended period—especially within healthcare. Now is the right moment considering that the economy is on the up, and Cyprus is a well-known tourist destination. Given that medical tourism is a combination of tourism plus healthcare, our strong reputation as a tourist destination given our perfect weather and our safe living spaces combine well; we now have to prove ourselves on the other half—healthcare. We have many projects underway awaiting government approval, and we see significant investments coming in.

What are your objectives for the next five years?

We have a large number of members, many of which are working individually, and we are now trying to implement our strategy and set in place the formation of a proper cluster. Furthermore, we seek to create complete packages for the medical tourism industry. The entire package would include the whole journey of the patient, from arrival at the airport, transfers, accommodation, equipment, rehabilitation, return travel and follow-up. We do look forward to completing this task the right way and bring these entities to work together!

What would you like our readers to know, or best understand about Cyprus?

Cyprus is an accessible, unique, safe, well-known destination... and the food is excellent!

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