

High-tech and low prices attract medical tourists

More hospitals with top global accreditation than any country except for the U.S.

In less than a decade, Turkey has become a premier destination for medical tourism.

The term is a misnomer—these aren't the tourists who for centuries have been attracted to the healing properties of Turkish thermal spas. These are people, sometimes seriously ill, who have decided to seek medical treatment outside their home countries.

Reasons to travel for medical treatment vary. Some patients live in developing countries with poor medical infrastructure. Some patients from other countries face long waits for medical treatment at home. Other patients want affordable options for elective procedures, such as in-vitro fertilization or laser eye surgery, that they have to pay themselves.

Turkey stands out in every respect. Turkey counts 39 hospitals accredited by the Joint Commission International, the global division of the main hospital accrediting body in the U.S. That's almost 10% of the total world-wide and the most of any country, not counting the U.S.

"Turkey has a robust health-care system and hospitals," Josef Woodman, author of "Patients Beyond Borders," a guide to medical travel, says from Chapel Hill, N.C. "It should make Westerners—or anyone considering medical tourism—put Turkey on a short list of preferred destinations."

Several of Turkey's top hospitals have affiliations with renowned institutions from other countries. Acibadem Health Group, which comprises 11 general hospitals, eight medical centers, a laboratory and a genetic diagnostic center at locations around the country, is affiliated with Harvard Medical International. Anadolu Medical Center, based near Istanbul, is affiliated with Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Five of Turkey's 12 major hospital groups were founded between 2000 and 2006, and most of the top hospitals are housed in new buildings, purpose-built to Western specifications. The Mayo Clinic advised Kent Hospital in Izmir on design, medical guidelines and administrative protocol.

These institutions are outfitted with the latest technology, such as the Gamma Knife for neurosurgery and the CyberKnife for oncology. "Not many countries have that," says Levent Bas, chief executive of International Medical Treatment, or IMT, an Istanbul-based company that assists international patients with travel. Seven locations in Turkey have the CyberKnife, compared with 24 in all of Europe, and two in India.

"You see General Electric or Siemens MRIs, Philips monitoring equipment, Pfizer drugs, Hill-Rom beds. They have Western equipment. It's the

same environment patients would see in the U.S.," says David Boucher, president and chief operating officer of Companion Global Healthcare Inc., a Columbia, S.C., company that works with self-insured employer groups—companies that pay for all or a big part of their workers' health-care bills—to find affordable high-quality solutions.

Heart bypass surgery costs \$80,000 to \$130,000 in the U.S., but around \$9,500 in Turkey—less than popular medical tourism destinations such as Thailand, Singapore or South Korea, according to Mr. Bas of IMT. A knee replacement can cost \$40,000 in the U.S., vs. \$9,000 in Turkey.

Companion, which works with 31 hospitals in 13 countries, doesn't just look at costs. It first collects clinical data, then also evaluates how many flights are required, how patients are received from the plane, English-language television stations, laptop loaners, Western newspapers, English-speaking staff, U.S. or Western trained staff, and so on. "Turkey's numbers stack up very well internationally," Mr. Boucher says.

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From the moment the 209-bed Anadolu Medical Center opened its doors in February 2005, it had a vision of serving not just Turkey but also neighboring countries, says Asli Akyavas, chief of international services for Anadolu. "The founders could foresee a need in the former Soviet Union and other countries that lack staff and the latest infrastructure."

Overall, Anadolu's international patients rose from a handful in 2005 to 350 to 400 a month today, mostly from Eastern Europe, Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the U.S. International patients accounted for a quarter of the hospital's revenue last year.

Nearly 85% of Anadolu's international patients come for oncology treatment, and about 15% are for cardiology. Anadolu has a 22-bed dedicated unit for bone marrow transplants equipped with special air filters.

Anadolu opened with Europe's fifth CyberKnife, which uses lower doses of radiation that are focused from different angles. "The other four centers had waiting lists, and since [Cy-



Several of Turkey's top hospitals, such as Acibadem Health Group (top) and Anadolu Medical Center (above), have affiliations with renowned institutions from other countries.

berKnife] was new technology patients had to pay out of pocket. It was expensive," Ms. Akyavas says. Anadolu had no waiting list, and "we are affordable

compared with other centers of high quality in Europe. You are going to receive the same quality of care, if not better, here at much more affordable prices

compared with Europe and the U.S.," she says. In six years, Anadolu has treated more than a thousand cancer cases with the CyberKnife.

Treatments such as oncology, cardiology or spinal surgery require long recovery times. Often spouses or family members accompany patients. Anadolu built a 48-bed hotel on the campus for recovering patients and their relatives and already plans to expand it.

It also plans a rehabilitation center, medical spa and nursing school. "We hope one day to become a teaching hospital," Ms. Akyavas says.

A key advantage for patients choosing Turkey is its location, far closer to Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa than other medical tourism destinations like India or Thailand. That's an advantage for treatments such as hip replacements, where a long flight post-operation can be uncomfortable, as well as in cases such as oncology, where care might require follow-up visits or treatments at regular intervals.

The text of this Special Advertising Section was written by Catherine Bolgar

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