

References

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CROSS-BORDER DENTAL CARE BETWEEN AUSTRIA AND HUNGARY

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Summary: Cross-border movement for dental care between Austria and Hungary has been widespread for several decades. Austrians seek dental care in Hungary particularly for affordable and timely prosthetic treatments that are not covered by Austrian health insurance. This article analyses key drivers of cross-border dental care, including patients' motivations and regulatory provisions, and addresses the implications for safety and quality of care. Results suggest that safety of cross-border dental care may be enhanced through (1) informed choices over treatment options, (2) continuous follow-up care and (3) enhanced transparency and exchange of information between providers across countries.

Keywords: *Dental Tourism, Cross-Border Care, Prosthetic Treatments, Quality Assurance, Patient Safety*

Hungary and dental tourism in Europe

Hungary has been recognised as a main destination country for dental treatment in Europe, attracting patients from bordering and non-bordering countries.¹ In particular, cross-border movement for dental care between Austria and Hungary has occurred for several decades. Austrian patients seek dental treatment in Hungary particularly for affordable prosthetic treatments which are largely uncovered by statutory health insurance in Austria.

Hungary's widely known prominence in dental care provision in Europe must be understood in the context of

the privatisation process of dental care beginning in 1995. The introduction of fee-for-service payments, in combination with subsidies to cover fixed costs, led to a significantly decreased budget for publicly financed dental care.² As a consequence, dental practices and laboratories were separated and often privatised. This privatisation process and emergence of new private providers was enhanced by foreign patients from Germany and Austria seeking dental treatment in Hungary, especially in the Austrian-Hungarian border region. Due to reliable service provision and the good cost-quality ratio, dental care tourism to Hungary started to expand. In the last

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decade, increasing prices in Western Europe, low-cost airlines and improved dental care made Western Hungary and Budapest the main destinations for dental tourists from all over Europe.¹ This trend was reinforced by Hungary's accession to the European Union (EU), the introduction of the European Health Insurance card in 2004, and finally the EU Directive on the application of patients' rights in cross-border health care (2011/24/EU).

Dental Cross-Border Care between Austria and Hungary

The case study on cross-border dental care between Austria and Hungary undertaken within the Evaluating Care Across Borders (ECAB) project sought to examine the scale and nature of cross-border dental care between the two countries, its underlying drivers, the regulatory context and implications for patient safety and quality of care. Cross-border dental care between Austria and Hungary is unique as strong cultural-historical ties between the two countries and geographical proximity have led to a specialisation of dental services for German-speaking patients. Furthermore, dental care offered by Hungarian doctors is often packaged with the help of agencies providing all-inclusive-services for clients, especially in the border region.² A Hungarian and an Austrian ECAB team conducted this research which used multiple methods, including data collection from health insurers on existing regulatory reimbursement provisions of cross-border dental treatments in Austria. In addition, qualitative interviews with Austrian patients (11) and dentists (10), Hungarian regulators and professional bodies (10) and a survey of Hungarian dentists (273) were conducted.

Better value for money? Key findings

Estimates of the scope of dental tourism between Austria and Hungary in 2006 range from 70,434 to 160,000 patients.³⁻⁵ Our survey undertaken with Hungarian dentists reveals that Austria represents the second largest source of foreign patients in Hungarian dental practices after German patients. The broad range of these figures results from a lack of official numbers on Austrian patients receiving dental care in Hungary due to the fact that most of the

dental services are paid out-of-pocket.⁶ The large majority of Austrian patients travel to Hungary for fixed prosthetic treatments (e.g. bridges, implants, and crowns) that are not covered by statutory health insurance in Austria. For defined medical reasons, only removable and necessary dentures are partially refunded by health insurance. The limited coverage of state-of-the-art dental treatment is thus the main reason for Austrians travelling to Hungary where implants are provided at up to half of the prices charged in Austria. Importantly, treatment quality in Hungary has become comparable with Austrian standards. Hungarian dentistry is known for well-trained dentists who provide high quality care using state-of-the-art technologies. The regulatory framework on professional standards is continuously developed and supervised, resulting from adherence to European-level protocols and standards in order to ensure patient safety and quality.

The findings show that the main motive of patients seeking dental treatment in Hungary is the better value for money they receive for prosthetic treatments. In general, individuals travelling to Hungary for dental care (1) received recommendations from relatives and friends, (2) appreciate the all-inclusive services offered by agencies or dental offices and (3) were reached by targeted marketing by Hungarian dentists. Austrian patients are mostly satisfied with the treatment they receive in Hungary, in particular with the price and quality of services and the strong customer service orientation. However, Austrian dentists observe quality gaps in the treatments even though they also confirm the excellent technical service that Hungarian dentists provide.

Despite significant quality improvements in Hungary over the last decade, Austrian dentists remain critical towards dental services provided in Hungary as they observe complications and long-term damage resulting from a lack of follow-up care, as most interventions are made during a defined period of time, often a week, and follow-up care is mostly not provided by the same dentist due to distance. While patients usually prioritise affordability and fast treatments, dentists noted that most patients are not aware

that fixed dentures require treatment over longer periods. The observations of Austrian dentists may be biased as they only treat patients with complications resulting from care received in Hungary. Nevertheless, with rising patient mobility to Hungary, Austrian dentists increasingly face competition on services and prices offered in Hungary and which are openly advertised in Austrian newspapers and websites.

Patient safety and continuity of care

In light of our findings, the movement of patients between Austria and Hungary for dental treatment raises new questions on the quality and safety of Cross-Border Care in the EU. The results suggest that cross-border dental care has many benefits for patients but also may come with a number of risks. To decrease the level of risk, patient safety should be enhanced by enabling them to make informed choices about treatments and to be involved in risk management (e.g. information on the duration of treatment). In particular, patients should be provided with specific information* on the risks inherent in Cross-Border Care (i.e. difficult access to follow-up care, and compliance). On the provider side, regulation is needed to ensure (1) obligatory and continuous follow-up care, (2) monitoring of patient flows and (3) an enhanced flow of information between care providers across countries.

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* This is supported by the fact that Member States codified the EU Directive (2011/24/EU) into national legislation in October 2013.