**Medical Tourism in Cyprus**

**Roundtable organised by CyprusProfile**

**CyprusProfile** asked four key stakeholders about the importance of developing a strong medical tourism sector in Cyprus.

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From left to right:

* Yiorgos Lakkotrypis, Minister of Energy, Commerce, Industry and Tourism
* Philippos Patsalis, Minister of Health
* Annita Demetriadou, Director of Tourism and Strategy at Cyprus Tourism Organisation (CTO)
* Charis Papacharalambous, Director General of Cyprus Investment Promotion Agency (CIPA)

**Yiorgos Lakkotrypis, Minister of Energy, Commerce, Industry and Tourism:**

"Health tourism, an intensely growing niche sector, constitutes an important part of Cyprus’ overall tourism strategy. It is particularly important for the expansion of the island’s tourism product as it can lead to many advantages, such as an increase in the average length of stay of visitors and subsequently an increase in total expenditure. At the same time, it contributes to the reduction of seasonality, supporting our current efforts to develop and promote year-round tourism to Cyprus.

The government’s objective, based on the country’s advanced medical services and its unique climatic attributes, is to establish Cyprus as an important health and wellness destination and attract visitors worldwide. Alongside the Cyprus Tourism Organisation, the Ministries of Energy, Commerce, Industry and Tourism and Health, and the Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board, are currently investigating the best way forward to utilise the full potential of Cyprus’s unique climatic advantages to target special needs groups, such as persons suffering from asthma and Seasonal Affective Disorder.

Our competitive edge at the moment is that we have all the fundamental elements in place with our robust tourism sector and excellent medical professionals and facilities, as well being an EU member state with a strategic geographical location between three continents. In addition, being a strong regional business centre and with a rapidly developing oil and gas sector attracting more business to the island, Cyprus has great prospects to further diversify and expand its product. Medical tourism could provide the economy of Cyprus with great opportunities and new revenue streams, which is why it is vital that we bring together all the relevant stakeholders to share their expertise and ideas in developing this niche sector of tourism."

**Philippos Patsalis, Minister of Health:**

"We are working collectively and with great aspiration for Cyprus to establish itself on the medical tourist map as a reputable medical centre and fast becoming a preferred value destination for medical tourism. Cyprus is already welcoming a great number of foreign patients seeking to enjoy the very high standard of care our medical centres offer combined with Cyprus exceptional weather and beauties. The country aspires to embrace this evolving market that's ripe for growth.

By offering great opportunities to combine medical treatments with great holidays, Cyprus is ready to welcome more patients to our medical centres. Our hospitals, clinics and the high number of qualified staff in our health services as well as the affordable prices for treatment are great assets for this segment to flourish. Cyprus’ Mediterranean environment with its natural wealth, a climate ideal for patient treatment and rehabilitation, tradition in healthy nutrition, historical and cultural heritage and internationally renowned medical professionals are among the few that any patient can experience  in Cyprus.

The implementation of the European Directive for Cross Border Health Care in 2014 allows the free movement of 450 million patients across the EU. The adoption of this truly reformist directive will contribute to improving the quality and safety of health care across Europe and ultimately benefit health care systems in individual EU countries. Cyprus is determined to tap into this market. As part of our strategy, links with major tour operators will further strengthen and calls will be made for more initiatives to be taken by will all the stakeholders involved; ministries, organizations, local authorities, Cypriot businesses. Cyprus has many more to offer as a medical tourism destination and a further healthier competition under the umbrella of our National Health Service which is to implement in full in 2016, will strengthen this effort of ours, offering better services to our patients."

**Annita Demetriadou, Director of Tourism and Strategy at Cyprus Tourism Organisation (CTO):**

“Attracting visitors for both leisure and health purposes, as well as for other niche tourism segments, is an integral part of our strategy. One of Cyprus’ bestselling aspects in terms of health tourism is the opportunity to combine holidays with medical treatments while visiting the island. In addition to our highly skilled medical professionals and great hospitals and clinics, Cyprus has great possibilities for relaxing and enjoyable post-treatment recuperation with our warm climate and 340 days of sunshine a year. Cyprus can offer a wide range of medical procedures and treatments, but we need to focus on certain types of services to establish an identity as a medical destination, such as phototherapy, dentistry, IVF and cosmetic surgery. Strong cooperation and synergies between tourism entrepreneurs, tour operators and medical professionals and facilities can only strengthen the development of this niche sector and help in our efforts to establish Cyprus as a destination of choice for medical tourists worldwide.”

**Charis Papacharalambous, Director General of Cyprus Investment Promotion Agency (CIPA):**

“Developing Cyprus as a competitive medical tourism destination provides numerous benefits for the economy and offers a great opportunity to connect the existing tourism infrastructure with the high-quality medical services sector. To brand, package and promote Cyprus successfully on a global level, it is imperative to have collaboration between all private and public sector stakeholders. Building this niche segment of tourism also further encourages foreign direct investments in healthcare infrastructure and could boost tourist numbers in general, especially during the low season. Cyprus is already a well-established and well-known tourist destination, which is a significant advantage to promote health tourism as a national product.”

# Christos Petsides, Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board

To become an established medical tourism destination, Cyprus must find more innovative ways to combine the tourism and health sectors, says Christos Petsides from the Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board.

#### Today, many countries are promoting themselves as medical tourism destinations. How is Cyprus developing this growing segment of tourism?

We have been actively developing our strategy for this niche sector since 2007 by bringing together the private health care and tourism industries in Cyprus. As a country we have a high standard of health care and are already known as a popular tourist destination, which puts us in a great position to cater to medical tourists.

The Cyprus Health Services Promotion Board (CHSPB) was established after an initiative taken by the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry and in close cooperation with the relevant stakeholders, the Cyprus Tourism Organisation (CTO) and the Ministry of Energy, Commerce, Industry and Tourism, are working hard to put Cyprus firmly on the medical tourism map. Cyprus is currently one of top five countries for British medical tourists to travel to for medical reasons – specifically for dental, cosmetic and fertility treatments. Cyprus is well-known for providing excellent health care, but competition is fierce and we still have a lot to do to develop this sector to its full potential.

We have the advantage of already being an established destination for holidaymakers, but we must find more innovative ways to combine these two sectors and establish a strong image as a medical tourism destination.

#### What are the key selling points of Cyprus as a medical tourism destination?

We have well-organised and state-of-the-art private hospitals and clinics fully in line with EU regulations and standards. Our winning combination of cost effective procedures and highly educated health professionals, with most of them educated in EU countries, mainly the UK and Germany and also in the US, is a major selling point. Also our strategic position between three continents – the Middle East, Africa and Europe – puts us in a convenient location for international patients seeking quality health care outside their home countries. The year-round temperate climate of Cyprus has great benefits for recuperation and rehabilitation. Historically, the region of Kyperounda was an ideal location for people suffering from asthma and other respiratory illnesses and many of our mountain villages have natural springs, which have long attracted visitors to find relief for many conditions. Cyprus also offers a safe and calm environment, where English is widely spoken, making the patients’ time here pleasant and easy to navigate.

#### What kind of potential does medical tourism in Cyprus have and what kind of revenue could this segment contribute to the economy?

It is very difficult to get reliable estimates of the medical tourism market internationally, and Cyprus is only in the first stages of developing its medical tourism market. However, approximate figures globally indicate it could give a significant boost to our economy. Worldwide medical tourism is a growing industry, with around 20% growth each year and with around €12 billion generated annually. Cyprus has great prospects to enter into this market with around 5 million patients around the world travelling abroad for treatments every year. We are cooperating with the CTO and the private health care industry to develop a way to record the numbers of medical tourist coming to Cyprus and hope to have some indicative figures for 2014. Even if we get a small percentage of this global market, it could have great benefits for the Cypriot economy and we need to work hard to tap into this opportunity. We have the advantage of already having the necessary infrastructure in place, both on the medical and tourism side, and now it is a matter of bringing these two sides together in an efficient way to harness the potential of medical tourism for Cyprus.

It is imperative to identify our strong points from a marketing perspective. Of course Cyprus’ health sector has the expertise to offer a wide range of medical treatments, but in terms of medical tourism we need to brand the country and identify what kind of treatments should be promoted and to which markets. For example, for some countries struggling with long waiting lists for certain procedures such as dental or orthopaedics, we can focus on promoting Cyprus as a viable and cost-effective alternative to receive those treatments.

In Cyprus we have a great opportunity to offer not only treatments, but also an ideal location to recuperate. Patients can holiday while having medical procedures, thanks to our established tourism infrastructure and short distances between our towns and cities. This is also a big factor for patients, who are accompanied by their families, as there are many great ways to spend their time in Cyprus.

#### There is a lot of hype about medical tourism worldwide with an increasing number of countries promoting themselves as destinations. What kind of quality assurances and systems does Cyprus have in place to reassure potential medical tourists?

First of all we are an EU member state and have all the necessary regulation in place. All the doctors and clinics in Cyprus are licenced and supervised by the Ministry of Health. Most of the clinics and hospitals also have their own industry accreditations, but we are encouraging them to get more international accreditations to give our facilities wider recognition worldwide. This is a process that a number of our top hospitals have already started and some have completed. All our health care providers are regulated and supervised, but gaining more international accreditations can only upgrade and further promote these establishments, as well as help reassure potential patients from around the world.

#### There is already interest from medical tourists in Cyprus, but are you also seeing interest from the international medical profession in conducting procedures in Cyprus or establishing cooperation with local doctors or hospitals?

We have seen an increase in interest from foreign doctors to come to Cyprus as well as from international companies who help patients find hospitals and doctors abroad. Most recently we have seen a number of doctors from Israel coming to Cyprus, both bringing their own patients here and providing new treatments that have not previously been available in Cyprus. We have also seen some doctors from the USA bringing their patients here to conduct procedures. There are many reasons for this increasing trend, but one is privacy and confidentiality. Cyprus has both a high-quality medical and tourism infrastructure, but also offers a safe and private location for patients to have sensitive treatments outside of their own country.

#### Which areas provide the most opportunity for foreign investment, strategic alliances and cooperation in Cyprus in terms of medical tourism?

Establishing rehabilitation centres as well as holiday resorts incorporating medical facilities are areas of great opportunity in Cyprus. We have major projects worth around €8 billion underway, which will help upgrade our product and boost our image as a destination for these services as well as attract more foreign investment into Cyprus. The insurance sector is also a deciding factor in medical tourism. Being a cost-effective destination for procedures, Cyprus could be a great location for insurers to consider sending patients, which is why it is essential to gain more international accreditations for our facilities. Also on the medical side, it is important to create alliances and more agreements with health care providers and national health care systems elsewhere in Europe to facilitate more cooperation. The EU cross-border health care directive already ensures the right for Europeans to seek medical care anywhere in the EU, but further agreements between countries will make the process easier and smoother for both patients and doctors and will help to target specific procedures for specific markets, making it a win-win situation.

#### How do you see medical tourism developing Cyprus in the next five years and what important milestones do you hope to achieve in this timeframe?

I want to see Cyprus as an established medical tourism destination of choice, and I believe we can achieve this in five years. It is however crucial to see solid commitment from all the stake holders within Cyprus, such as the government, hospitals and hoteliers. Cyprus is going through tough economic times today, but this growing segment of tourism could bring significant and much-needed revenue that would also filter into the wider economy. We have great potential as all the right elements are in place, but to succeed it is crucial to bring together our two strong economic sectors – tourism and health – and work on establishing our own identity and building a solid image as a medical tourism destination.

Travelling For Treatment

With 340 days of sunshine and crystal blue seas, top quality medical practitioners and state-of-the-art facilities, Cyprus is confident that it can stand out as a destination of choice for the growing number of medical tourists.

With a sophisticated medical infrastructure in place and as an established tourist destination attracting 2.5 million visitors a year, Cyprus has excellent foundations to develop into a thriving destination for medical [tourism](http://www.cyprusprofile.com/en/sectors/tourism) offering high quality treatments in a safe and enjoyable environment.

Medical tourism is a rapidly growing sector, generating €12 billion annually with around 5 million patients worldwide travelling for treatments every year. Cyprus has recognised the great economic potential of this niche sector. According to recent research, 10% of EU patients seek some form of healthcare beyond the borders of their country. Cyprus has a competitive edge and could capitalise on this trend as it easily combines excellent healthcare with holidays, and recuperation with enjoyment.

In addition to tourism, [health](http://www.cyprusprofile.com/en/sectors/health) is a robust economic sector providing Cyprus great prospects to cultivate this market. For the size of the country, Cyprus has a substantial private healthcare sector with 80 private hospitals and clinics, state-of-the-art medical centres and the latest high-tech equipment and ER facilities. But most importantly, the small EU member state offers quality medical services at affordable prices.

#### Highly Qualified Doctors and Cost-Effective Treatments

One of Cyprus’ most significant assets is human capital. The country’s medical professionals are highly qualified and experienced, with most trained abroad in renowned medical schools. Strictly regulated and fully in line with EU legislation, medical industry standards are high in Cyprus.

With increased competition in the global medical tourism market, international patients now expect quality medical care at a low cost. Considering these demands, Cyprus is already set to meet – if not exceed – these requirements. Around 85% of the global medical travel market consists of patients seeking affordable cosmetic surgery, dentistry, infertility treatments and obesity surgery. Fast and cost-effective treatments provided by experienced physicians are the ideal product for this niche sector, and Cyprus has a strong track-record in providing these services.

Some of the most popular medical treatments available in Cyprus are check-ups and diagnostic tests, elective surgery, dentistry, cosmetic and plastic surgery, fertility treatment and eye surgery. Cyprus is also a significantly cheaper option for cardiovascular and orthopaedic surgery. The country has already seen an increase in interest, attracting health travellers from Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia and the Middle East.

Cyprus has strong capabilities to develop niche services in the healthcare industry thanks to its mild Mediterranean climate and specific microclimates within the country. For example, the region of Kyperounda is renowned for its beneficial environment for asthma patients. Developing specialised treatments, such as rehabilitation and phototherapy, could accelerate Cyprus’ brand recognition as a unique medical tourism destination.

#### Winning Mix of Treatment and Leisure

One of the greatest advantages Cyprus has to offer is the attractive combination of treatment and [leisure travel](http://www.cyprusprofile.com/en/articles/view/medical-tourism-visiting-cyprus). Offering diverse attractions and entertainment opportunities, post-treatment recuperation for patients and their accompanying family can be a relaxing and enjoyable experience. Factors such as its strategic location, existing high standard of medical professionals and facilities, mild Mediterranean climate and its full range of hotels are elements that further improve the country’s prospects.

Cyprus has also emerged as one of the leading Mediterranean spa destinations, thanks to its great selection of hotels with holistic wellness and spa services. This coupled with the health-promoting Mediterranean diet and the natural beauty of Cyprus, allow medical tourists to indulge in healing both the body and the soul.

#### Accessible and Convenient

In addition to cost-effective quality care, Cyprus also has the competitive edge of convenience. Waiting times are short, same day appointments are the norm and it is possible to see a range of medical specialists in a single centre or within a quick drive, thanks to the short distances on the island. Also a considerable number of clinical laboratories offer speedy results for a wide range of both routine and specialised diagnostic tests. An added benefit for patients is the convenience of being treated in a multilingual country. English is widely spoken and with many physicians and nurses trained in the US and the UK, communicating medical conditions and concerns is done with ease. A large proportion of medical professionals also speak German, French, Russian or Arabic.

With a sophisticated infrastructure already in place in both the health and tourism sectors, the country has all the prerequisites and necessary elements to develop itself into a reputable international medical destination.

The implementation of the 2011 EU directive on cross-border healthcare is expected to bring additional business to Cyprus. The directive, recently incorporated into Cyprus law, allows EU citizens the choice of country and healthcare provider to receive treatment within the EU. The freedom to choose medical procedures based on cost and quality, establishes Cyprus as an attractive option. Also other EU national healthcare systems suffering from long waiting lists or high costs could potentially transfer patients to Cyprus to deliver cost-effective treatment faster.

#### A Promising Future

As a country aspiring to develop a high-quality medical tourism industry, Cyprus already has the key ingredients to capture a slice of the market and establish itself as a worthy competitor. The combination of a beautiful Mediterranean environment ideal for patient treatment and rehabilitation, a long tradition in healthy nutrition and internationally renowned medical professionals provides the country with excellent foundations to build on. Cyprus’ value for money offer is at the centre of this, as price is an important factor when considering healthcare treatment abroad. Medical tourism could bring substantial benefits to Cyprus and give the economy a much-needed boost. Now Cyprus must focus on its strengths, create synergies and a solid product it can promote globally in order to firmly place the country on the medical tourism map.