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## Medical Tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship: Development, Barriers, and Perspectives

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### **Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The West Pomeranian Voivodeship, particularly the city of Szczecin, occupies a distinctive position in the Polish medical tourism landscape due to its border location, accessibility for foreign patients, developed infrastructure, and concentration of private clinics specializing in aesthetic medicine and plastic surgery. The purpose of this article is to analyse the evolution, determinants, and future prospects of medical tourism in the region.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** This article presents a comprehensive analysis of medical tourism in the region, based on empirical research conducted between 2017 and 2024 in clinics serving international patients. The data include the number of foreign visitors, demographic structure, nationalities, age categories, gender distribution, and the popularity of selected procedures. The study is based on a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques (analysis of secondary data; clinic-level data analysis; qualitative interviews; narrative SWOT analysis). The methodological framework was designed to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of medical tourism, which intersects healthcare, economics, and tourism studies.

**Findings:** The findings reveal significant post-pandemic recovery, a dominant share of German patients, increasing numbers of visitors from the United Kingdom and Ireland, and a rising proportion of male patients.

**Practical Implications:** The narrative analysis demonstrates that medical tourism in Szczecin is strongly shaped by economic factors, regional attractiveness, service quality, and evolving patient expectations. The article concludes that the West Pomeranian Voivodeship has high potential for further development, provided systemic cooperation between the medical and tourism sectors is strengthened.

**Originality/Value:** The study is significant because it integrates empirical clinic-level data, regional tourism statistics, and theoretical perspectives on medical mobility. It also provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and healthcare providers.

**Keywords:** Medical tourism, West Pomeranian Voivodeship, Szczecin, aesthetic medicine, regional development, cross-border patients.

**JEL codes:** L83, I11, R11.

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## 1. Introduction

Medical tourism has emerged as a key component of the global tourism economy, representing a rapidly expanding market in which patients travel across borders to obtain medical procedures, often combining treatment with leisure or rehabilitation. In the context of the European Union, the mobility of patients has been reinforced by Directive 2011/24/EU, which guarantees reimbursement for selected treatments received abroad.

As nations compete for international patients, regions with strong healthcare infrastructure and tourism capacity have gained strategic importance. Poland is among the countries benefiting from this trend, offering high-quality medical services at competitive prices.

The West Pomeranian Voivodeship, located in north-western Poland, stands out due to its geographical proximity to Germany, its maritime climate, and its network of private clinics specializing in aesthetic and reconstructive procedures. Szczecin, the regional capital, has developed into one of the leading centers of medical tourism in Poland.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the evolution, determinants, and future prospects of medical tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from 2017–2024. The research answers the following questions:

- How has the structure of foreign patients changed over time?
- What motivates international patients to choose Szczecin?
- Which procedures are most in demand?
- What are the strengths and barriers to the development of medical tourism in the region?
- How can the region strengthen its position in the European medical tourism market?

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## 2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship nevertheless underscores that the absence of a coherent, broadly agreed definition of medical tourism, together with non-uniform measurement standards, hampers cross-study comparability and the reliable estimation of the phenomenon's scale (Bookman and Bookman, 2007; Lunt and Carrera, 2010; Connell, 2006; Hunter, 2007; Jones and Keith, 2006; Niezgodna and Kowalska, 2015; Rab-Przybyłowicz, 2016).

Bibliometric reviews indicate that Polish research is distinctly interdisciplinary, integrating, *inter alia*, economic, organisational, and marketing perspectives, which facilitates multi-dimensional inquiry while simultaneously increasing the risk of interpretive divergence (Lubowiecki-Vikuk and Białk-Wolf, 2025; Czekaj, 2018).

At the same time, domestic literature emphasises the particular prominence of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship as the region most frequently examined in relation to medical tourism development, including through doctoral research focused on Szczecin and its surrounding area (Markowski, 2017; Biernacka, 2014).

In parallel, studies on health tourism highlight growing health-oriented awareness and a tendency to combine leisure travel with improvements in physical and psychological wellbeing, thereby reinforcing demand for services situated at the intersection of the tourism and medical sectors.

The concept of medical tourism has been widely explored in international research. According to Białk-Wolf (2014), medical tourism involves voluntary travel outside one's country of residence in order to receive planned medical treatment. This distinguishes it from health tourism, which focuses on preventive care, wellness, and spa services.

Medical tourism encompasses a wide range of procedures - from aesthetic and reconstructive surgery to dentistry, orthopedics, infertility treatment, and minimally invasive interventions. Panasiuk *et al.* (2017) emphasize the role of innovation, digitalization, and global communication in stimulating medical tourism. Patients have unprecedented access to information about providers, prices, and treatment options, enabling cross-border comparison.

Wiśniewska (2019) highlights the significance of European Union regulations that support the free movement of patients and facilitate reimbursement processes. Common determinants influencing patients' decisions to travel include:

- Cost differentials between countries, often favoring Central and Eastern Europe;
- Short waiting times, particularly for elective procedures;
- High medical standards supported by internationally trained specialists;
- Positive word-of-mouth and online reviews;
- Possibility of combining treatment with leisure, rehabilitation, or holiday activities.

Research also shows that regions with attractive natural and cultural environments draw more medical tourists because the overall experience extends beyond treatment itself (Białk-Wolf, 2014).

Polish research has demonstrated that areas close to Germany - such as West Pomerania and Lower Silesia - are especially well positioned to attract foreign patients due to geographic proximity, price competitiveness, and the density of private clinics. The West Pomeranian Voivodeship's role has grown steadily, supported by rising patient satisfaction, increasing infrastructure investments, and diversification of clinic services.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The research presented in this article is based on a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. The methodological framework was designed to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of medical tourism, which intersects healthcare, economics, and tourism studies. The empirical material derives directly from the author's master's thesis and was collected between 2017 and 2024.

The primary research methods included:

- Analysis of secondary data, such as statistical reports published by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), regional tourism reports, and publicly available healthcare data concerning the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.
- Clinic-level data analysis, based on internal records provided by selected private medical clinics in Szczecin that regularly serve foreign patients.
- Qualitative interviews, including an expert interview with a representative of the medical tourism sector, which provided insights into market mechanisms, patient expectations, and organizational challenges.
- Narrative SWOT analysis, used to evaluate internal and external factors influencing the development of medical tourism in the region.

The study focused on seven private clinics specializing primarily in aesthetic medicine and plastic surgery. These facilities were selected due to their long-standing presence in the regional healthcare market and their experience in serving international patients.

The data collected included information on the number of foreign patients per year, country of origin, gender and age structure, and the types of medical procedures performed. The choice of a narrative data analysis approach was deliberate. Rather than presenting results solely in tabular or statistical form, the study emphasizes interpretative descriptions that contextualize numerical trends within broader social and economic developments.

This approach allows for a deeper understanding of patient behavior and regional dynamics. Certain limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The analysis focuses exclusively on private clinics and does not include public healthcare institutions, which play a minor role in medical tourism.

Additionally, while the data provide a detailed picture of trends in Szczecin, caution should be exercised when generalizing findings to other regions of Poland without further comparative research.

#### **4. Development of Medical Tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship**

##### **4.1 Regional Context and Historical Background**

The West Pomeranian Voivodeship has long been associated with tourism due to its coastal location, spa towns, and maritime heritage. Cities such as Świnoujście, Kołobrzeg, and Międzyzdroje have traditionally attracted visitors seeking health-related stays, rehabilitation, and wellness services.

This historical foundation created favorable conditions for the later emergence of medical tourism. In the early 2000s, the region experienced a gradual transformation of its healthcare sector, marked by the expansion of private medical services and increased investment in modern medical technologies. Szczecin, as the largest urban center in the voivodeship, became the focal point of this transformation. The city developed a dense network of specialized clinics offering high-quality medical procedures comparable to those available in Western Europe.

##### **4.2 The Role of Szczecin as a Medical Tourism Hub**

Szczecin's role in medical tourism is closely linked to its geographical location. Situated near the German border and well connected by road, rail, and air transport, the city is easily accessible for patients from Germany, Scandinavia, and the United Kingdom.

Travel time from Berlin to Szczecin is approximately two hours, making short medical trips feasible and cost-effective. In addition to accessibility, Szczecin offers a comprehensive urban infrastructure that supports medical tourism. This includes a wide range of hotels, serviced apartments, restaurants, and leisure facilities that meet international standards.

The presence of universities and medical training centers also contributes to a steady supply of qualified healthcare professionals. The development of medical tourism in Szczecin has been driven largely by private initiative.

Clinics actively invest in marketing, multilingual communication, and patient-centered service models. Many facilities provide comprehensive packages that include pre-operative consultations, treatment, post-operative care, and assistance with accommodation and transportation.

### **4.3 Infrastructure and Supporting Services**

Medical tourism does not operate in isolation from the broader tourism economy. The West Pomeranian Voivodeship benefits from a diversified tourism infrastructure that enhances its attractiveness to foreign patients. Coastal resorts, natural parks, and cultural attractions enable patients to combine treatment with recovery in a pleasant environment.

Data from the Central Statistical Office indicate a steady increase in tourist traffic in the region over the past decade, with a significant share of foreign visitors. Although not all tourists are medical travelers, the overlap between tourism and healthcare services is substantial. Many clinics collaborate with hotels and wellness centers to offer post-treatment recovery stays, which are particularly appealing to patients undergoing aesthetic procedures.

Transport infrastructure has also improved, with the expansion of road networks and the modernization of Szczecin-Goleniów Airport. These developments facilitate international access and reduce logistical barriers for foreign patients.

### **4.4 Economic and Institutional Factors**

From an economic perspective, medical tourism contributes to regional development by generating income not only for healthcare providers but also for the hospitality, transport, and service sectors. Foreign patients typically spend several days in the region, increasing demand for accommodation, dining, and leisure activities.

Institutionally, however, the development of medical tourism remains fragmented. While individual clinics are proactive, there is no comprehensive regional strategy specifically dedicated to medical tourism promotion. Coordination between healthcare providers, tourism organizations, and local authorities is limited, which constrains the sector's full potential.

Despite these challenges, the West Pomeranian Voivodeship exhibits favourable conditions for further growth. The combination of historical health tourism traditions, modern medical services, and regional attractiveness creates a strong foundation for sustained development.

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## **5. Patient Demographics and Narrative Data Analysis**

The empirical data collected between 2017 and 2024 reveal clear trends in the structure and behaviour of foreign patients using medical services in Szczecin. The analysis demonstrates both the sensitivity of medical tourism to external shocks - most notably the COVID-19 pandemic - and its capacity for rapid recovery once mobility restrictions were lifted.

Between 2017 and 2019, the number of foreign patients treated in the analysed clinics increased steadily. In 2017, clinics reported 576 international patients, rising to 670 in 2018 and reaching 858 in 2019. This growth phase was interrupted by the pandemic, which caused a dramatic decline in 2020 (126 patients) and 2021 (98 patients).

From 2022 onward, however, the sector began to recover dynamically, with 624 patients recorded in 2022, 703 in 2023, and 823 in 2024. By the end of the observation period, the number of medical tourists exceeded pre-pandemic levels, indicating strong latent demand and renewed patient confidence.

Nationality data point to a clear dominance of German patients throughout the entire period. In 2024, individuals from Germany accounted for approximately 72% of all foreign patients treated in the surveyed clinics. This dominance reflects geographic proximity, ease of transport, and significant cost differentials between Poland and Germany.

Patients from the United Kingdom and Ireland formed the second-largest group, jointly accounting for roughly one-quarter of all foreign visitors. Scandinavian patients - primarily from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark - represented a marginal but stable segment of the market. Gender structure analysis shows that women consistently constituted the majority of foreign patients.

In 2017, women represented over four-fifths of all international clients. Over time, however, the share of male patients increased steadily. By 2024, men accounted for approximately 27% of all foreign patients, compared to only 17% in 2017. This trend suggests a gradual normalization of aesthetic and elective medical procedures among male clients, particularly in areas such as body contouring and facial treatments.

Age distribution data indicate that the core group of medical tourists consisted of individuals aged between 30 and 39 years, who represented approximately 60% of all foreign patients in 2024. Younger patients aged 18-29 formed a smaller but notable group, often seeking minimally invasive procedures. Patients over the age of 50 accounted for a limited share, reflecting the predominance of aesthetic medicine rather than complex surgical interventions requiring longer recovery periods.

In terms of procedures, liposuction was the most frequently performed intervention among foreign patients in 2024, followed by breast augmentation and non-invasive treatments such as fillers and botulinum toxin injections. Facial procedures, including facelifts and rhinoplasty, also remained popular.

Notably, labioplasty emerged as a significant category, indicating diversification in the scope of services sought by international patients. The growing popularity of minimally invasive procedures reflects broader global trends favouring shorter recovery times and lower procedural risk.

The primary motivations for choosing Szczecin as a medical tourism destination were economic and organizational in nature. Patients most frequently cited lower costs compared to their home countries, shorter waiting times, and high perceived quality of care.

Recommendations from acquaintances and positive online reviews also played a substantial role in shaping patient decisions. Importantly, satisfaction levels were high, with the vast majority of respondents indicating willingness to recommend the clinics to others.

## **6. Supply-Side Characteristics of Medical Tourism Services**

The supply side of medical tourism in Szczecin is dominated by private clinics with long-standing experience in the regional healthcare market. Most of the surveyed facilities have been operating for more than ten years, and a significant proportion for over two decades. This longevity contributes to institutional stability and patient trust.

Clinics typically offer a broad portfolio of services, combining surgical and non-surgical procedures. Many facilities have invested heavily in modern medical equipment and continuous professional development of staff. International experience and foreign-language competence among medical personnel are common, particularly in clinics targeting German- and English-speaking patients. Despite these strengths, the level of formal internationalization varies.

Only a minority of clinics maintain dedicated foreign-patient departments providing comprehensive assistance such as translation, airport transfers, and administrative support. More commonly, clinics rely on cooperation with external intermediaries, including medical tourism agencies and online platforms that facilitate patient acquisition.

Marketing activities are primarily conducted through digital channels. Websites, social media presence, and patient review portals are essential tools for reaching foreign audiences. Word-of-mouth recommendations remain particularly influential, reinforcing the importance of service quality and patient satisfaction.

## 7. Tourism Infrastructure and Regional Attractiveness

The development of medical tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship is closely intertwined with the region's tourism infrastructure. The area offers a diverse range of accommodation options, from high-standard hotels in Szczecin to spa resorts along the Baltic coast.

This diversity enables clinics to tailor recovery packages to different patient preferences and budgets. Statistical data from the Central Statistical Office show a long-term upward trend in tourist arrivals and overnight stays in the region.

Although medical tourists constitute only a portion of overall visitors, their economic impact is disproportionately high due to longer stays and higher per-capita spending. Natural and cultural assets further enhance the region's appeal. Coastal landscapes, maritime heritage, and proximity to nature provide favourable conditions for post-treatment recovery.

For many patients, the possibility of combining medical procedures with leisure activities represents an important added value. From a strategic perspective, the integration of medical services with tourism offerings remains underdeveloped. While individual clinics collaborate with hotels and wellness centers, a coordinated regional approach is largely absent. Strengthening such integration could significantly enhance the competitiveness of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in the international medical tourism market.

## 8. SWOT Analysis of Medical Tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship

A narrative SWOT analysis was conducted to assess the internal and external factors influencing the development of medical tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship. This approach enables a comprehensive evaluation of the region's competitive position within the European medical tourism market.

### *Strengths:*

One of the most significant strengths of the region is its geographical proximity to Western Europe, particularly Germany. Short travel distances and convenient transport connections make Szczecin an accessible destination for short-term medical trips. Another major strength is the high quality of medical services, delivered by well-trained specialists using modern equipment and internationally recognized techniques.

The advantage cost of medical procedures compared to Western European countries remains a decisive factor for foreign patients. In addition, the region benefits from a diversified tourism infrastructure, including hotels, spa facilities, and recreational attractions, which allow patients to combine treatment with recovery and leisure.

*Weaknesses:*

Despite its advantages, the region faces several internal weaknesses. A key limitation is the lack of a coordinated regional strategy for medical tourism development. Activities are largely fragmented and driven by individual clinics rather than institutional cooperation.

Another weakness is the limited availability of standardized international certifications, which could further enhance trust among foreign patients. Language barriers and insufficient multilingual communication in some facilities also restrict broader international outreach. Moreover, collaboration between the medical sector and tourism organizations remains underdeveloped.

*Opportunities:*

External opportunities for growth include the aging population in Europe, increasing demand for aesthetic and elective medical procedures, and the ongoing digitalization of healthcare services, such as teleconsultations and online patient management systems.

European Union regulations supporting cross-border healthcare create favourable legal conditions for patient mobility. Additionally, growing social acceptance of aesthetic treatments among both women and men expands the potential target market.

*Threats:*

Key threats include strong competition from other Central and Eastern European destinations, such as the Czech Republic and Hungary, which actively promote medical tourism. Economic instability, currency fluctuations, and potential regulatory changes also pose risks. Furthermore, shortages of medical staff and rising labour costs could limit future capacity growth.

## **9. Discussion**

In light of the scoping review of medical tourism research in Poland, it should be emphasised that the interdisciplinary character of this field facilitates broad interpretation of findings while simultaneously constraining their synthesis and comparability across institutions and academic disciplines.

In the context of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, it appears particularly important to deepen demand-side analyses—covering patient motivations, perceived risk, and patient experience—as well as to examine the role of digital information channels, which the literature indicates remain insufficiently explored in domestic research.

In parallel, the health tourism literature points to increasing health-oriented awareness and a tendency to combine leisure travel with improvements in physical

and psychological wellbeing, which may strengthen the complementarity of medical services with wellness, rehabilitation, and spa offerings in the region.

From a destination management perspective, it is also warranted to consider the development of durable forms of collaboration among clinics, local government, and the tourism sector, as the absence of concrete coordination mechanisms is frequently identified in the literature as a barrier to effective cooperation at the regional level.

The findings of this study confirm that medical tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship is a resilient and growing sector. Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused a temporary collapse in international patient mobility, the rapid recovery observed after 2021 indicates strong underlying demand and sustained competitiveness.

Compared with existing literature, the results align with previous studies emphasizing the importance of cost advantages, service quality, and accessibility (Białk-Wolf, 2014; Panasiuk *et al.*, 2017). However, the increasing share of male patients and the growing popularity of procedures such as labiaplasty highlight evolving market dynamics that deserve further scholarly attention.

The lack of institutional coordination identified in this study echoes concerns raised by Wiśniewska (2019) regarding fragmented governance in medical tourism development. Addressing these structural challenges is essential for long-term competitiveness.

## 10. Conclusions and Recommendations

This article demonstrates that the West Pomeranian Voivodeship - particularly the city of Szczecin - possesses substantial potential to strengthen its position as a medical tourism destination in Europe. The region benefits from a favourable location, competitive pricing, high - quality medical services, and an attractive tourism environment. To fully exploit this potential, several strategic actions are recommended:

- Development of a regional medical tourism strategy, integrating healthcare providers, tourism organizations, and local authorities under a common brand.
- Strengthening international promotion, including multilingual digital platforms and participation in international health tourism fairs.
- Implementation of quality standards and certifications to increase transparency and trust among foreign patients.
- Investment in human capital, particularly in foreign language training and intercultural communication skills.

- Enhanced cooperation with neighboring countries, especially Germany and Scandinavian states, to facilitate cross-border partnerships.
- Future research should focus on comparative studies between Polish regions and other European medical tourism destinations, as well as on patient satisfaction and long-term economic impacts.

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