



## AN EVALUATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPORTANCE OF HEALTH TOURISM IN TÜRKİYE\*\*

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### Abstract

Today people participate in tourism activities for different reasons. In this context, health tourism has become very popular as people travel for both health and holiday purposes. Health tourism has a very important place among tourism types due to its features such as not being seasonal, being able to be done all year round, and requiring longer stays depending on the treatment condition. Türkiye is a very assertive destination in the field of health tourism, thanks to its geographical location, climate characteristics, natural resources, expertly trained manpower and qualified tourism facilities. In this study, data was obtained from secondary sources by using the document review technique, one of the qualitative research methods, and the development and importance of health tourism in Türkiye was evaluated. In this context, studies on the status of health tourism in Türkiye have been examined, and Türkiye's strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities in health tourism have been discussed. In addition, using tourism data between 2003 and 2023, the number of tourists coming to Türkiye for medical and health reasons and the tourism revenues obtained from health tourism were evaluated and predictions were made for the future of health tourism.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Health Tourism, Türkiye

### Introduction

Health tourism is a special type of tourism with great potential (Dunets et al., 2020:2213). After the Covid-19 epidemic, people started to pay more attention to healthy living. What people experienced during the pandemic period made them aware of the importance of their mental health as well as their physical health. This situation has also affected tourists' behavior and holiday preferences. In this context, it can be said that the interest in different types of tourism has increased. Zhong et al. (2024) stated that after the Covid-19 epidemic, tourists perceived medical and wellness tourism as critical activities and components. In this context, it can be said that more interest in health tourism and its types will increase.

The fact that individuals want to receive high quality health services without waiting in line and at affordable prices, and at the same time, travel abroad to benefit from tourism activities, has led to the formation of the field of health tourism (Çelikkanat and Güngörmüş, 2018:3938). According to Özer and Songur (2012:78), the factors that attract many tourists to Türkiye for treatment purposes within the scope of health tourism are; Türkiye's convenient geographical location, improvement of health services, increase in the number of private health institutions, increase in the quality of health services and relatively cheaper health services compared to other countries in the world. Gündüz, Gündüz and Yavuz (2019:734) stated that Türkiye's location advantage, hospitable attitude and the fact that it has gained momentum in the health sector in recent years will enable tourists to turn to Türkiye in the field of health tourism.

The importance of health tourism stems from the fact that it directly centers on human health. The fact that people who cannot heal with the facilities of the place they live or who recover late seek healing elsewhere has created a phenomenon called health tourism. In addition, health tourism consists of activities that can be done at any time of the year (Özkurt, 2007:126). In this context, especially in recent years, global health

\*\*The abstract of this study was presented orally at the congress called "Sustainability, Leadership and Current Studies Conference in Multidisciplinary Sciences" held in Rome, Italy, between 01-04 February 2024.

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DOI: 10.33083/joghat.2024.430

problems have caused people to travel for both health and holiday purposes, making health tourism very popular. Health tourism has a very important place among tourism types because it is not seasonal, can be done all year round, requires longer stay depending on the treatment condition, and can be integrated with other types of tourism. In this context, Türkiye is a very assertive in the field of health tourism with its geographical location, climate characteristics, natural resources, expertly trained manpower and qualified tourism facilities. The main purpose of this study is to examine the development and importance of health tourism in Türkiye. In this context, it is aimed to evaluate the studies on the status of health tourism in Türkiye and to examine Türkiye's strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities in health tourism and to make suggestions. In addition, for this purpose, the number of tourists coming to Türkiye for medical and health reasons and the tourism revenues obtained from health tourism were evaluated using tourism data between 2003 and 2023.

### **Theoretical Background**

The concept of health travel dates back to ancient times when people traveled to find the best healthcare services (Wong and Hazley, 2021:267). Özşarı and Karatana (2013:138) discussed health tourism in five sections: thermal tourism, elderly tourism, disabled tourism, spa-wellness and medical tourism. According to Amouzagar et al. (2016:88) health tourism “refers to travel for more than 24 hours in a place other than the individual's place of residence in order to benefit from services that improve or develop the individual's physical or psychological health.” Dunets et al. (2020:2223) healthy tourism, “includes tourist route elements that aim to regain one's physical, emotional and psychological strength.” According to Kurçer and Civelek (2022:38) people's desire to live longer and be healthier and the increase in the third-age population increases the demand for health tourism and the market in this field. In addition, an important feature of this type of tourism is that the duration of stay in health tourism is longer than in other types of tourism and there is no seasonality.

Today, health tourism has become a national industry in more than 50 countries. While health tourism used to progress from developing countries to developed countries, today it is progressing from developed countries to developing countries. Negative situations such as high healthcare costs and long waiting times for treatment in developed countries have made countries such as Thailand, India, Singapore, Malaysia and Türkiye popular in health tourism (Çelikkanat and Güngörmüş, 2018:3938). The main motivations for people traveling for health tourism are generally factors such as access to specialized treatments, cost savings, shorter waiting times and the opportunity to combine medical procedures with leisure travel. The most popular destinations in the world in terms of the services and features they offer in health tourism are: Thailand, India, Singapore, Türkiye, Hungary, Costa Rica, South Korea, Brazil, Spain and Malaysia (Global Healthcare Accreditation, 2023). The top five countries in the 2022 wellness tourism ranking are the United States, Germany, France, Austria and Switzerland, respectively. Türkiye ranks 20<sup>th</sup> in this list (Global Wellness Institute, 2023:58). When the medical tourism index report in 2020-2021 is examined, it is seen that Canada ranks first. Canada is followed by Singapore, Japan, Spain and the United Kingdom, respectively. Türkiye ranks 30<sup>th</sup> in this ranking of 46 destinations in the world (Medical Tourism. com, 2020). When the top twenty markets of 2022 are examined in terms of thermal resources, China ranks first. China is followed by Japan, Germany, Russia, Italy, United States, Hungary, Brazil and Taiwan, respectively. Türkiye ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in this list (Global Wellness Institute, 2023:76). Health tourism in Türkiye was first included in the Fifth Five-Year Development Plan. It became official with the establishment of the ‘Health Tourism Unit’ in 2010 and emerged as a policy in serious studies after 2010. Health tourism is not only a hospital-doctor focused service sector that requires medical treatment, but also an economic field that can yield much faster results than investments in other sectors (Burtan Doğan and Aslan, 2019:413). However, health tourism in Türkiye is not yet at the desired level (Aydın, 2012; Özşarı and Karatana, 2013; Daştan, 2014).

There are studies in the literature that discuss Türkiye's situation in terms of health tourism (Aydın, 2012; Özşarı and Karatana, 2013; Edinsel and Adıgüzel, 2014; Kördeve, 2016; Uysal Şahin and Şahin, 2018; Ağaoğlu, Karagöz and Zabun, 2019; Kurçer and Civelek, 2022). Additionally, it is seen that there are studies addressing the situation of health tourism in the world and in Türkiye (Özer and Songur, 2012; Yardan et al., 2014; Sülkü, 2017; Bulut and Şengül, 2019; Burtan Doğan and Aslan, 2019). When these studies are evaluated in general, it is stated that Türkiye has a significant potential in the health tourism, that it has become very popular especially in recent years and that Türkiye is one of the important destinations in health tourism. However, it is stated that Türkiye is not at the desired level yet and has deficiencies and inadequacies.

In the literature, there are studies that specifically investigate thermal tourism on a destination basis. In this regards, the thermal tourism potential of these destinations was investigated: Afyonkarahisar (Sandıkçı and Özgen, 2013), Çanakkale (Bucak and Özkaya, 2013), İnegöl- Oylat (Akçay et al., 2014), Çermik- Diyarbakır (Başkaya, 2015), Sakarya (Zengin and Eker, 2016), Bolu (Tuna, 2019), Döngel Kaplıcası-Kahramanmaraş (Karademir, Sandal and Bilinir, 2019), Kuşadası (Bostan, 2020), Konya province and its districts (Ekici and Büyükşalvarcı, 2021), Erzurum (Çetinkaya, Yağcı and Önek, 2022), Tavşanlı (Çalışkan and Arı, 2023). When these studies examining specific regions are evaluated, it is generally seen that these destinations and regions have important resources, but there are infrastructure and superstructure inadequacies, especially the lack of tourism facilities, and the resources are not used effectively.

## Methodology

In this study, secondary data was used by using the document review technique, one of the qualitative research methods. According to Sak et al. (2021:228) document analysis is a scientific research method that “*can be defined as the collection, evaluation, query and analysis of various documents as the primary source of research data.*” Studies on the development and status of health tourism in Türkiye were examined. In this study, tourism data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) for the period 2003-2023 was used. In line with these data, the number of tourists coming to Türkiye for medical and health reasons and the tourism revenues obtained from health tourism were evaluated. In this regard, answers to the following questions were sought.

- What are Türkiye’s strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities in health tourism?
- What are the results of the studies conducted on the current situation of health tourism in Türkiye?
- What is the development of health tourism in Türkiye between 2003 and 2023?

In this study, secondary data was used using the document analysis technique. In this context, tourism data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) for the period 2003-2023 were used. Since the study was created using publicly available secondary data, it does not require ethics committee approval.

## Results

According to expenditure types tourism revenues consist of 13 heading: individual expenditures; package tour expenditures (share of Türkiye); accommodation; health; food and beverage; transport (inside Türkiye); tour services; sports, education, cultures; international transportation by Turkish company; other goods and services; clothes and shoes; souvenirs; other expenditures. Table 1 shows Türkiye’s total tourism income and income from health expenditures between 2003- 2023.

**Table 1. Türkiye’s Total Tourism Income and Income from Health Expenditure (2003 – 2023)**

Year	Tourism Income (2003 – 2023)		*Type of Expenditure= Thousand \$	
	Tourism Income	Health	%	
2003	13 854 868	203 703	1,47	
2004	17 076 609	283 789	1,66	
2005	20 322 110	343 181	1,69	
2006	18 593 950	382 412	2,06	
2007	20 942 500	441 677	2,11	
2008	25 415 067	486 342	1,91	
2009	25 064 481	447 296	1,78	
2010	24 930 996	433 398	1,74	
2011	28 115 693	488 443	1,74	
2012	29 689 249	627 862	2,11	
2013	33 073 502	772 901	2,34	
2014	35 137 949	837 796	2,38	
2015	32 492 212	638 622	1,96	
2016	22 839 468	715 438	3,13	
2017	27 044 542	827 331	3,06	
2018	30 545 924	863 307	2,83	
2019	38 930 474	1 492 438	3,83	
2020	14 817 273	1 164 779	7,86	
2021	30 173 587	1 726 973	5,72	
2022	46 477 871	2 119 059	4,56	
2023	54 315 542	2 307 130	4,25	

Source: The table was created by the author using TÜİK data. (TÜİK, 2023). Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Turizm-Istatistikleri-III.-Ceyrek:-Temmuz---Eylul,-2023-49604>

When Table 1 is evaluated, it is seen that tourism income has increased in recent years. It is seen that the income obtained from health expenditures has also increased within this income. Table 2 shows the number of visitors departing according to the purpose of visit between 2003 and 2023, and the number of visitors departing for medical or health reasons. Visit purposes are in the following categories: travel, entertainment, visiting relatives and friends; health or medical reasons (less than a year); sportive or cultural activities; education, training (less than a year); shopping; religion / pilgrimage; transit; business (conferences, meetings, assignments etc.), and other.

**Table 2. Number of Visitors Departing and Visitors Departing for “Health or Medical Reasons” (2003 – 2023)**

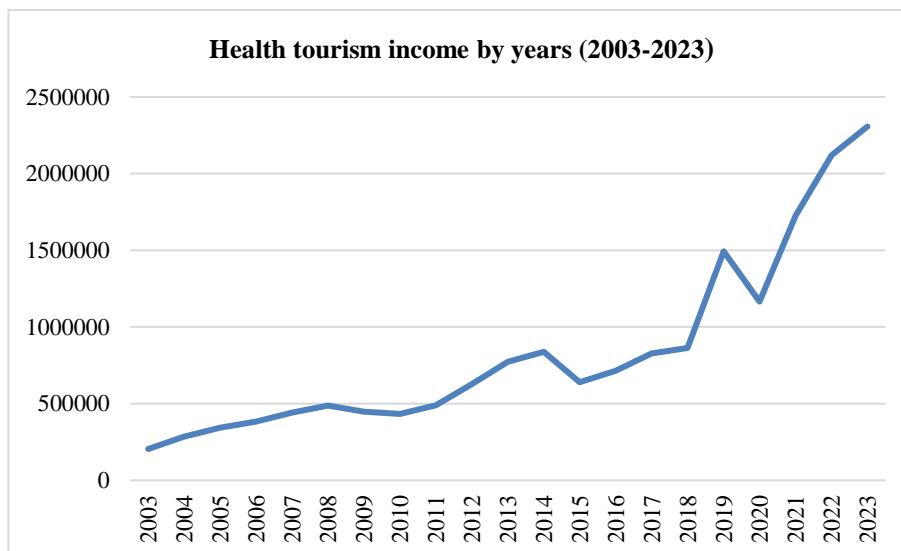
Departing Visitors (2003 – 2023)			
Year	Total	Health or medical reasons	%
2003	16 302 050	153 223	0,94
2004	20 262 642	204 790	1,01
2005	24 124 502	269 801	1,12
2006	23 148 669	230 171	0,99
2007	27 214 988	223 882	0,82
2008	30 979 979	261 240	0,84
2009	31 972 377	222 597	0,70
2010	33 027 944	183 070	0,55
2011	36 151 328	208 524	0,58
2012	36 463 921	240 682	0,66
2013	39 226 226	300 102	0,76
2014	41 415 070	473 896	1,14
2015	41 617 530	395 019	0,95
2016	31 365 330	400 699	1,28
2017	38 620 346	467 302	1,21
2018	45 628 673	594 851	1,30
2019	51 860 042	701 046	1,35
2020	15 826 266	407 423	2,57
2021	29 357 463	670 730	2,28
2022	51 369 026	1 258 382	2,45
2023	57 077 440	1 398 504	2,45

Source: The table was created by the author using TÜİK data. (TÜİK, 2023). Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Turizm-Istatistikleri-III.-Ceyrek:-Temmuz---Eylul,-2023-49604>

\*Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, annual data for 2020 consists of 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quarter data.

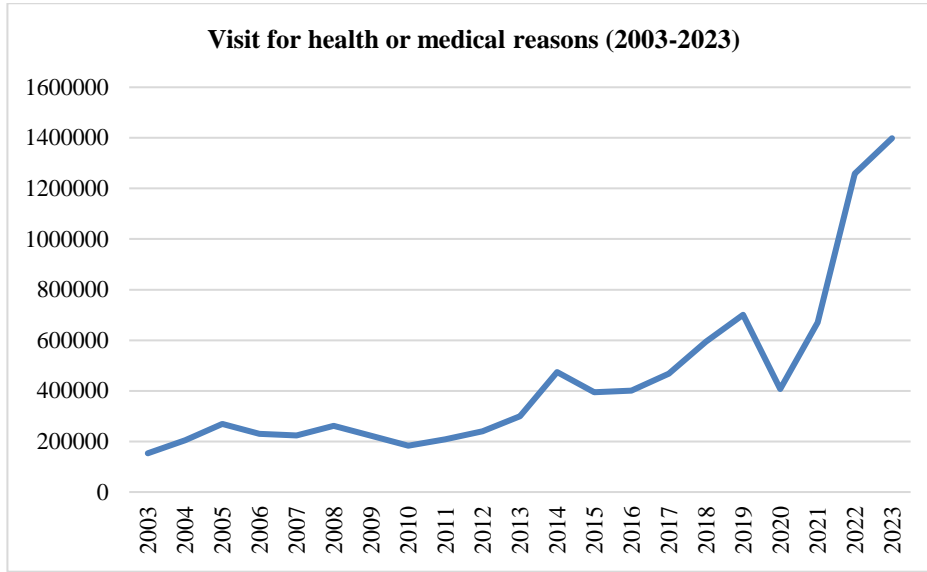
When Table 2 is evaluated, it is seen that the number of visitors departing according to the purpose of the visit and the number of visitors departing for health or medical reasons are increasing. Additionally, information in Table 1 and Table 2, created using the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK, 2023), is shown graphically in Graphic 1 and Graphic 2.

**Graphic 1. Health Tourism Income by Years (2003-2023)**



Source: The graphic was created by the author using TÜİK data. (TÜİK, 2023).

**Graphic 2. Visit for Health or Medical Reasons (2003-2023)**



Source: The graphic was created by the author using TÜİK data. (TÜİK, 2023).

Especially the Middle Eastern countries, Germany, United Kingdom, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan are the countries that send the most health tourists to Türkiye (R.T. Ministry of Trade, 2024). The clinical branches most preferred by international patients are; ophthalmology, gynecology, medical biochemistry, internal medicine, dentistry, orthopedics, general surgery, traumatology, ear-nose-throat and infectious diseases (USHAŞ, n.d.). According to Üstün and Demir Uslu (2022:350) push and pull factors that are effective in health tourists choosing Türkiye as a health tourism destination; cultural and physical proximity, visa convenience, affordability and accessibility factors. In addition, the factors that cause patients to visit Türkiye for health tourism are; factors related to health facilities and services are Türkiye being a tourism destination, affordable health costs in Türkiye and environmental factors. According to the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TÜRSAB) Health Tourism Report (2014), Türkiye’s strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in health tourism are in Table 3, and according to Uysal Şahin and Şahin (2018:297), Türkiye’s threats in health tourism are in Table 4.

**Table 3. Türkiye’s Strengths, Weaknesses and Opportunities in Health Tourism**

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Türkiye is one of the world’s leading countries in the field of health,</li> <li>• Türkiye is in a good position in the service sector and in this context, the positive impact of the service sector on health tourism is quite high.</li> <li>• The existence of a wide variety of tourism types that will positively affect the demand for health services in Türkiye,</li> <li>• Health prices are relatively cheaper than other developed countries that provide health services,</li> <li>• Being among the first countries to offer health tourism services and gaining experience in this regard,</li> <li>• Existence of various legal regulations and government supports regarding health tourism.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing has been relatively neglected in health services,</li> <li>• The “collaboration-partnership culture” that will enable the implementation of the integrated approach required by health tourism is weak,</li> <li>• Lack of coordination between public institutions in support and incentives,</li> <li>• Lack of a clear national strategy for health tourism management.</li> <li>• The majority of hospitals, especially public hospitals, are not ready to provide health tourism services,</li> <li>• In the current situation, instead of “health tourism” with high added value, “tourist health” services with low added value are gaining importance,</li> <li>• Comprehensive processes and systems that will record and control mobility in the field of health tourism on a national scale have not yet been developed and made operational,</li> <li>• Health institutions do not show the necessary care, cooperation and speed in sharing information and data with the Ministry of Health.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With the influence of globalization, the tendency to receive health services outside national borders has increased,</li> <li>• It has become increasingly cheaper and easier to obtain information about health institutions and services in other countries,</li> <li>• Turkey's increasing power in the international arena and the resulting positive perception,</li> <li>• Ministry of Economy's support for health services exports (support for opening offices abroad, research support, promotional support, etc.)</li> </ul>
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Source: The table was created by the author based on TÜRSAB Health Tourism Report (2014). Türkiye Seyahat Acenteleri Birliği (Association of Turkish Travel Agencies)- TÜRSAB, Sağlık Turizmi Raporu (22 September 2014). Retrieved January 7, 2024, from [https://www.tursab.org.tr/haberler/tursab-saglik-turizmi-raporu\\_11430](https://www.tursab.org.tr/haberler/tursab-saglik-turizmi-raporu_11430)

**Table 4. Türkiye's Threats in Health Tourism**

<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health tourism is rapidly affected by global crises,</li> <li>• Türkiye has many competitors in the field of health tourism,</li> <li>• Political instability in neighboring countries. The possible effects of this on Türkiye and the impact of these effects on tourism,</li> <li>• Airline companies are not sufficiently prepared for patient transfer.</li> </ul>
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Source: Uysal Şahin and Şahin, 2018:297.

Türkiye's location and the richness of its natural resources make it an ideal destination for health tourism. Türkiye's strengths in health tourism increase its competitiveness. It is important to take into account the Türkiye's weaknesses health tourism and as stated in the literature eliminate the deficiencies and inadequacies. According to Uysal Şahin and Şahin (2018:297), Türkiye has a significant potential and power in health tourism. In order to achieve its goals, Türkiye needs to identify its weaknesses and take threats into consideration. It is necessary to eliminate disruptions in accommodation and transportation and increase promotion and marketing opportunities.

### Conclusion and Evaluation

Due to characteristics, health tourism is a very advantageous type of tourism for the country's economy. Features such as being available 12 months a year and requiring long stays depending on the type of treatment make health tourism very attractive for countries. Türkiye has the potential to be an ideal health tourism center due to location and geographical features. However, even though there is an increase in the number of tourists coming for health and medical reasons every year, Türkiye is not at the desired level. For this, Türkiye's weaknesses in health tourism need to be strengthened. Also important to further develop strengths and focus on opportunities.

When Türkiye's tourism income by type of expenditure and departing visitors by purpose of visit data between 2003 and 2023 are evaluated, shows that increased every year but could not reach the desired level of increase. In the literature, Aydın (2012), Özsanı and Karatana (2013) ve Daştan (2014) stated in their studies that health tourism is not yet at the desired level. In this context, suggestions are;

- Destination-based branding can be implemented by considering Türkiye's leading destinations in health tourism and their characteristics. Especially in the literature, many studies on thermal tourism, one of the types of health tourism, have been conducted on a provincial basis and its importance and potential have been discussed. In this context, it is seen that Türkiye has many natural resources in health tourism. According to Tontuş (2022), what is important is which type of health tourism the country or province is suitable for and the branding of the destination with this. For example, Bursa, Afyon, Yalova and Nevşehir provinces stated that they could be brands in thermal tourism, İzmir and it's region in Spa and wellness tourism, İstanbul in medical tourism and Antalya in elderly tourism.
- In the literature, seen that there are mainly studies on thermal tourism in Türkiye. In addition, considering that Türkiye is ranked 10<sup>th</sup> among the best markets in the world in terms of thermal resources in 2022, according to the Global Wellness Institute (2023) report, can be recommended to give more importance to the field of thermal tourism, especially within Türkiye's health tourism. In this context, infrastructure and superstructure works can be focused on within the scope of sustainable

tourism understanding. Can be suggested that thermal tourism be highlighted more in Türkiye's promotion and marketing strategies.

- In the literature, there are mainly studies on increasing foreign language knowledge and giving importance to it (Aydın, 2012; Özsarı and Karatana, 2013; Kantar and Işık, 2014; Yardan et al., 2014). In this regard, it can be suggest that foreign language knowledge should be given importance to the personnel who will serve especially in the health tourism.
- It can be recommended to work on promotion and marketing. Aydın (2012:95) stated that promotional and marketing activities should be carried out both at national and international levels. Özsarı and Karatana (2013:143) stated in their study that government support for international promotion and marketing should be provided and information should be provided about Türkiye's health system by organizing fairs or congresses.
- It can be recommended to give importance to the training and development of personnel who will serve in the health tourism in terms of quality and quantity. Kantar and Işık (2014:15) also stated that including a health tourism course in the training of health professionals, improving the quality and quantity of personnel working in the field of health tourism, defining professional standardization especially in the fields of elderly care and gerontology, and supporting it with non-misleading advertisements will increase the quality of health tourism studies. Edinsel and Adıgüzel (2014:187) stated that due to the insufficient number of doctors in Türkiye and the lack of trained personnel working in practices, some branches are insufficient, therefore it would be appropriate to increase the education and direct the new generation to the health tourism sector and eliminate the deficiency in this regard.
- According to Pessot et al. (2021:1), natural resources are considered among the main determinants for the improvement of healthy living and therefore the development and sustainability of health tourism destinations. Therefore, it can be recommended that Türkiye's natural resources should be protected and used sustainably.

In future studies, health tourism stakeholders can be interviewed. Considering the characteristics of the cities in Türkiye, it can be recommended to carry out studies for destination-based development and marketing in terms of health tourism.

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