

WHAT FUTURE FOR HEALTH SPAs?
THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF PATIENTS AND USERS OF THERMAL
CENTRES

by

Alceste Santuari (Secretary General of EAPTC)

Umberto Solimene (Presidente FEMTEC)

Health care services are currently undergoing a number of challenges, especially due to budget restraints, which risk undermining cross-border healthcare too and accordingly patients' rights.

Against this background, what is the role that patients and users of thermal centres can play? What lies ahead for them? Are they to be treated differently from any other patient?

Over the years, the notion of "thermae" has been changing from a "place" where to go and get cured to a "destination" where to find solutions to health and life expectations at large. The evolution of the cure concept has brought with it then a change in the way thermal centres are perceived by the public.

Health SPA centres play a significant role in the preventive medicine and they are regarded as an important component of the overall "health market". This market is wider than both thermal medicine and the wellness system only. Indeed, the "health market" comprises of various and different aspects, such as sports, life style, food education as well "other" types of health tourism.

This evolution implies that thermal centres are no longer deemed to be as a social phenomenon only. By contrast, SPA resorts are considered to be places where to spend individual and quite short stays, during which "tourists" get *also* cured but especially are taken care of. Indeed, whereas in the past thermal centres were used to be attended for relatively long periods of time and by ill people, nowadays thermal resorts are visited for shorter periods of time by "health tourists". These individuals are willing to exploit many or all the tourist opportunities that the area can offer to them while and after being treated. It is

noteworthy that these treatments are no longer only strictly medical but they can also be (and it is often so) referred to a general state of health wellbeing.

In the light of the aforementioned evolution, will health SPA centres be the same in the future? Will they be necessary – where applicable – dependent on national health systems? What if, against a background in which many European countries are facing significant financial and budget restraints, thermal centres will cease to be financed, at least partly, by the national health systems? Will they lose their health component? Will they be less attractive to users? Will they have to face an inevitable decrease both in economic and reputation terms?

These are some of the questions, which thermal centres and those who are engaged in the sector are to face.

As to the government funds that thermal centres benefit from in some European countries, it is noteworthy that such a financial support has progressively been decreasing. This trend has caused health SPAs to supply their services onto a market in which private individuals are willing to pay for the treatments. However, to some extent these remain perceived as having an important health component, which is regarded as beneficial to individuals' health needs. Therefore, any political measure that would exclude thermal treatments from those ensured by the national health systems does not *per se* necessarily imply the closing of thermal establishments. Those thermal centres that are capable of supplying high standard health services coupled with ancillary tourist services seem to have already partly balanced such a "loss".

The international movement of persons willing to travel to find out the "right place" to go for their health has witnessed to the importance of singling out a proper strategy by which thermal centres can be viewed as that place. Indeed, thermal centres and resorts can offer health services of high quality and standards based on qualified professionals and a well rooted scientific validation of the cure properties.

Accordingly, the future of thermal centres cannot but be defined by the strengthening of scientific research aimed at showing the beneficial health implications of the services and provisions supplied. Likewise, investments are to be made to enlarge the range and variety of health provisions that individuals can find in thermal establishments. In this respect, for

instance, a new role for preventative medicine should be explored, so as to test the potential of thermal centres to match individuals' needs.

A renewed attention should be devoted to the modes and procedures by which thermal centres intend to be presented to the public. On the one hand, national and regional governments should promote the natural resorts where thermal centres are usually located better and more effectively. On the other hand, health authorities should foster and monitor the licensing process at the end of which thermal centres are registered in the single countries. As the European Court of Justice stated in the Leichtle case, the registration requirement is of a paramount importance to identify a medical SPA.

A positive evolution of thermal centres also requires a new organisational pattern: the representatives of thermal centres are expected to programme the services they supply as attractive to companies' funds and health insurance funds, which are seeking new health services to offer their members/insurers.

Is then a new pattern for thermal centres feasible and also desirable? The answer is in the affirmative, provided that all actors (politicians, health and tourist authorities, private investors) are given the adequate legal, organisational and financial frameworks by which to test and prove their partnership effective. Along with them, a new and fundamental role is to be played by the users of the services supplied by thermal establishments. By complying with the specific treatment prescribed by practitioners or chosen on the basis of their individual health needs, users cannot be left on their own to decide which is the most adequate "place" to go for that treatment. Users and patients need to be aware of the following aspects characterising thermal centres in order to be able to choose "the right one":

- Food, Nourishment, Diet and Nutrition
- Movement, Exercise and Fitness
- Touch, Massage and Bodywork
- Mind/Body/Spirit
- Aesthetics, Skin Care, Natural Beauty Agents
- Physical Space, Climatology, Global Ecology
- Social/Cultural Arts and Values, Spa Culture
- Management, Marketing and Operations
- Hygienic safety
- Time, Rhythm and cycles

The more effectively thermal centres will be capable of communicating their qualities and proving their health and scientific validation, the more users will benefit from them. Appropriate treatments along with preventative medicine can actually do some good to national health systems, especially if they are able to make the most out of the possibilities offered by cross-border health care.

The European Association of Patients and Users of Thermal Centres is committed to enhancing a better and greater role of those European citizens who either need or simply are willing to benefit from thermal services and treatments.