

Future of Health SPAs

The Vice-President of the Health & Tourism Committee, Professor Alceste Santuari, was invited to present a paper on “EU Directive on Cross-border care: Opportunities for the SPA industry” at the “International Congress Health and Wellness Tourism 2020” which was held in Unhais de Serra (Porgual) on 17-18 November 2014.

The Congress, which was organised by the Portuguese SPA Association, in partnership with the European Commission and the National Tourism Agency, was an unique opportunity to debate on the future development of health SPAs, in particular.

During his presentation analysed the legal provisions of Directive 2011/24/EU, underlying the overall favourable framework that the directive represents. Yet he addressed the issue concerning the present economic and financial situation that constraints the single Member States to reduce freedom of movement for patients.

Hence, under these circumstances, it would be better to focus on how to implement effectively the directive into the national health and tourism system. In this respect, Professor Santuari, after referring to the Portuguese legislation concerning health SPAs, pointed out that the health and tourism national authorities should cooperate and work together to set up the national contact point that the Directive provides for so as to make the whole supply capacity of Portuguese tourist and health system more attractive for European citizens.

Furthermore, Professor Santuari added that over the last years, health SPAs have been known not only for the effectiveness of the health care services provided but also because usually:

- a) their locations are fascinating;
- b) the ancillary services provided are of a high quality standard;
- c) they are easy to get to.

In this context, the reputation of a thermal resort is actually capable of benefiting the whole surrounding area, thus strengthening the concept of tourist destination. In modern times, it is possible to point out that the quality of the services (i.e. medical SPA resorts) along with the welcoming capacity and the perception of well-being are all characters that contribute to increase the appeal of the tourist destination in which the thermal resorts carry out their activities.

Tourist packages are then to fully assess the “value added” represented by thermal resorts, both by means of a higher level of scientific validation and through the experimentation of new legal and organisational forms whereby to manage the resorts. Marketing at the local level together with the awareness that health SPAs represent essential assets are supposed to foster the growth of the resorts themselves.

Accordingly, health SPAs are by definition set to carry out positive and long-lasting co-operation between tourism promotion and health care services, thus linking two concepts that especially at the European Union level have been lately very much enhanced.

After the presentation, the participants were invited to ask the speaker questions. In particular, Dr. Pedro Cantista, President of the Portuguese Society of Medical Hydrology and President Elect of the International of Medical Hydrology and Climatology, asked Professor Santuari to deepen to the concept of health tourism and its actual possibility of implementation as far as health SPAs are concerned.

A debate followed during which Professor Santuari stressed the importance of arranging adequate organisational and legal tools so as to meet European patients’ needs. Finally, Professor Santuari stated that Femtec is willing and available to offer all its skill, networking and support to the development of health SPAs in Portugal.