



## Organic Medical Tourism at the Border: The Natural Dynamics of Ciudad Juárez-El Paso

## Turismo Médico Orgánico en la Frontera: La Dinámica Natural de Ciudad Juárez-El Paso

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### Abstract

Medical tourism is a growing global industry. Ciudad Juarez, although it has historically received patients from the United States, has not achieved the success of other border regions in this sector. This article aims to analyze the organic development of medical tourism in Ciudad Juarez and the challenges it faces. A qualitative methodology was used, consisting of interviews with eighteen patients, healthcare professionals, and actors from the tourism industry. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed. The main findings reveal that the quality of medical services, healthcare safety, and competitive costs have facilitated the growth of medical tourism in the city, although better coordination between the healthcare and tourism sectors is needed to enhance its success. The conclusion of the study is that, although medical tourism in Ciudad Juarez has developed organically, its potential can be maximized with greater integration and collaboration among the involved stakeholders. The original contribution of this work lies in identifying the organic nature of medical tourism in this region, an aspect that has been underexplored in previous studies, and in proposing strategies for its sustainable and competitive development.

### Keywords:

Medical tourism, Cross-border healthcare, Ciudad Juarez-El Paso, Organic development, Medical services.

### Resumen

El turismo médico es una industria global en crecimiento. Ciudad Juárez, a pesar de haber recibido históricamente pacientes de Estados Unidos, no ha alcanzado el éxito de otras regiones fronterizas en este sector. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar el desarrollo orgánico del turismo médico en Ciudad Juárez y los desafíos que enfrenta. Para ello, se empleó una metodología cualitativa basada en entrevistas a 18 pacientes, profesionales de la salud y actores de la industria turística. Las entrevistas fueron transcritas y analizadas temáticamente. Los principales resultados revelan que la calidad de los servicios médicos, la seguridad sanitaria y los costos competitivos han facilitado el crecimiento del turismo médico en la ciudad, aunque se requiere una mejor coordinación entre los sectores de salud y turismo para fortalecer su éxito. La conclusión del estudio es que, aunque el turismo médico en Ciudad Juárez ha evolucionado de manera orgánica, su potencial puede maximizarse con una mayor integración y colaboración entre los actores involucrados. La contribución original de este trabajo radica en la identificación de la naturaleza orgánica del turismo médico en esta región, un aspecto poco explorado en estudios previos, y la propuesta de estrategias para su desarrollo sostenible y competitivo.

### Palabras clave:

Turismo médico, salud transfronteriza, Ciudad Juárez-El Paso, desarrollo orgánico, servicios médicos.

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## Introduction

Medical tourism has gained increasing importance globally due to its ability to meet the demand for high-quality healthcare at more affordable prices (Lunt & Carrera, 2010; Ebrahim & Ganguli, 2017; Junio et al., 2017). This phenomenon enables millions of people to access treatments and procedures that may be out of reach in their home countries due to high costs, long waiting times, or lack of specialization (Carrera & Bridges, 2006; Kim et al., 2019). Additionally, medical tourism fosters international competition in the health sector, driving improvements in service quality and innovation in healthcare delivery. However, authors such as Crooks et al. (2019) have raised concerns about the commodification and export of private health services. They argue that while these services are promoted due to perceived economic benefits, they can exacerbate health inequities and negatively impact human health resources in receiving countries.

Despite these challenges, the global relevance of medical tourism lies in its economic impact, generating significant revenue for host countries and promoting the development of healthcare and tourism infrastructure. This transnational exchange of medical services not only benefits patients but also strengthens global health collaboration, facilitates access to advanced technology, and contributes to the development of a more equitable and efficient global health market.

In this context, the aim of this study is to analyse the cross-border medical tourism product of Ciudad Juárez–El Paso, investigating the reasons behind its organic development and the challenges it faces. Given the need to explore options for the socioeconomic recovery of the Juárez–El Paso border region—which has experienced various development models over the decades—it is essential to design innovative and cutting-edge frameworks. Although trade, tourism, and the maquiladora industry have generated employment, they have not been sufficient to achieve comprehensive and sustainable social and economic development for the city. Therefore, it is crucial to establish projects that promote progress in global areas, such as transforming Ciudad Juarez into a health hub through the creation of medical tourism services.

Understanding medical tourism in Ciudad Juarez is critical for several reasons. First, Ciudad Juarez, due to its border location with the United States, has significant potential to attract international patients, particularly those seeking high-quality treatments at more affordable costs. Understanding this phenomenon can help identify opportunities to improve medical services and infrastructure, benefiting both patients and the local economy. Moreover, a detailed analysis of medical tourism can reveal areas for improvement in health policies and intersectoral cooperation, fostering more cohesive and efficient development. Finally, this knowledge is vital for designing marketing and positioning strategies that allow Ciudad Juarez to compete effectively in the growing global medical tourism market.

The structure of this article is organized as follows: First, a general overview of tourism at a global level is presented. Next, medical tourism in Mexico is examined, including a comparative analysis between two cross-border destinations: Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana. Subsequently, medical tourism in Ciudad Juarez is explored in detail. The methodology employed is then described, followed by the presentation of the results and conclusions.

### Global Medical Tourism

Health tourism emerged as a distinct market position within the tourism industry (Connell, 2006) and rapidly expanded into an international sector where people travel long distances for medical, dental, and surgical care, often combining it with a vacation (Heung et al., 2010). Medical tourism is a multi-billion-dollar industry that continues to grow. Currently, countries are competing to capitalize on this expanding global industry (Lunt & Carrera, 2010; Ebrahim & Ganguli, 2017; Junio et al., 2017). Nations worldwide are making significant investments to attract medical tourists by offering high-quality healthcare at low costs alongside hospitality and concierge services (Sandberg, 2017). Due to long waiting lists, the high cost of elective treatments, and fewer travel barriers, the idea of receiving healthcare abroad is becoming increasingly attractive to many (Carrera & Bridges, 2006; Kim et al., 2019).

While medical tourism seems focused solely on the trade of medical services, its impact is broader. This market helps alleviate deficiencies in the healthcare systems of developed countries. However, the countries benefiting from this industry sometimes discourage it when they observe significant revenue losses. To compensate, these nations often invest more in health centres and the expansion of global hospital chains in destinations where medical tourism flourishes (Connell, 2006). Nevertheless, Crooks et al. (2019) highlight growing concerns about health inequities caused by medical tourism. Medical reputation is crucial, encompassing recommendations on patient safety, fair payments, loyalty, discretion, and honesty (Boga & Weiermair, 2011). A solid medical reputation is essential for building patient trust and ensuring service quality.

Medical tourism began in the late 19th century with patients from developing countries traveling to Europe and the United States for treatments unavailable in their home countries. Today, the scenario has reversed, with patients from developed nations travelling to developing countries for more affordable medical procedures. While many prefer surgeries in their hometown, some choose to travel abroad to save costs when facing financial constraints (Banerjee et al., 2018).

Globalization has facilitated cross-border healthcare in three key areas: information, patients, and professionals. With the outsourcing of diagnostics and the widespread use of the Internet, patients research and travel abroad for more specialized or cost-effective treatments—a phenomenon known as medical tourism. Advances in transportation and information networks are making global movement for medical care easier (Khan et al., 2016; Esiyok et al., 2017), eliminating national restrictions, reducing time constraints on healthcare access (Kim et al., 2019), and ensuring the availability of standard services 24/7 (Nakajima, 2018). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported that in 2018, most of its member countries exported health services, totalling \$7.818 billion. The United States was the leading exporter, contributing \$4.097 billion (OECD, 2019).

As Kasemsap (2018) identifies, globalization has increased connectivity among nations, enabling citizens to seize medical opportunities abroad. Traditionally, medical tourism was divided between patients from developing countries seeking advanced care and patients from developed countries seeking lower prices. However, a new type of medical tourism is emerging: the “nomadic” type,

where patients extend their stay to receive post-operative care without the need to return home quickly (Noguchi, 2018). Besides, artificial intelligence, with its ability to analyse large datasets and detect patterns, offers new opportunities for personalized healthcare, accurate diagnosis, and optimal treatment planning. Robots are improving surgical techniques by increasing precision and reducing invasiveness. These technological advancements can influence medical tourists' decisions and elevate healthcare standards (Roy & Sharma, 2024).

Medical tourism, beyond offering specialized healthcare services, boosts local economies and fosters knowledge exchange and international collaboration in the health sector. At the same time, the growing demand for medical services abroad has driven improvements in the quality of care and healthcare infrastructure in receiving countries, strengthening their position in the competitive global health market (Martínez et al., 2016). As these authors pointed out, medical tourism is one way people seek healthcare services outside their countries, driven by the reduction and privatization of healthcare systems. These changes have limited governments' ability to provide necessary services to their populations (Virani et al., 2019; Lunt & Mannion, 2014; Cohen, 2015; Connell, 2015).

The objective of this research is to analyse the cross-border medical tourism product of Ciudad Juárez-El Paso, investigating the reasons behind its organic development and the challenges it faces. The Ciudad Juárez-El Paso region warrants detailed analysis due to its uniqueness as a meeting point between two cultures and distinct healthcare systems. As one of the busiest border zones between Mexico and the United States, this region offers a unique context where medical tourism dynamics are driven by geographical proximity and the demand for accessible, high-quality healthcare services. Ciudad Juárez has emerged as a key destination for U.S. patients seeking lower-cost treatments, reflecting the growing disparity in healthcare accessibility on both sides of the border.

Moreover, the constant interaction between these two border cities creates an environment where medical practices, health policies, and economic strategies intertwine, offering a unique opportunity to study how these factors influence the development of medical tourism. Analysing this region can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by border cities in the context of medical tourism and how these experiences can inform policies and practices in similar regions worldwide.

### **Medical Tourism in Mexico**

Mexico has become the leading destination for medical tourism in Latin America. The country boasts fifteen specialized medical clusters that integrate highly complex services and generate significant economic interactions. Key destinations include Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez, Monterrey, and Cancun. These cities offer treatments such as dental care, cosmetic surgery, hip replacements, cardiovascular surgery, and oncology, with prices that can be up to 50% lower than those in the United States (Guzmán, 2021).

This movement of people and industries is seen, according to Merino (2022), as "an opportunity and an important interdisciplinary economic activity that involves diverse interests, sectors, services, stakeholders, and, above all, skills" ("Medical tourism and its contributions to the country's growth").

2). Furthermore, it is estimated that by 2030, medical tourism will increase by 25%. This activity is expected to have a positive impact on the country’s economy by attracting investment and generating employment, not only in the medical sector but also in industries such as hospitality, tourism, and restaurants. The Ministry of Tourism reported that in 2021, the value of this sector ranged between \$8 billion and \$8.8 billion, with \$3.5 billion belonging to the tourism sector. Merino (2022) also notes that between 1.4 and 3 million foreigners travelled to Mexico for medical purposes, positioning the country as the second-largest destination globally, surpassed only by Thailand. This boom is largely due to surgical procedures in areas such as oncology, cardiology, ophthalmology, plastic surgery, and dentistry, which offer savings of 35 to 85% depending on the procedure and the treatment timeline (Merino, 2022: 4).

Cross-border medical tourism is particularly significant, as 75% of such activity in Mexico takes place at border locations (Deloitte, 2019). Therefore, understanding the government’s current strategies for leveraging this opportunity is crucial, as is delving deeper into the growing role of private sector actors and organizations such as academe, chambers of commerce and industry, and medical associations. These entities could support the development of medical tourism destinations, thereby diversifying development options for regions currently heavily reliant on the maquiladora industry.

Comparative Cases: Tijuana-San Diego Border Region

The following table summarizes the motivations identified by various authors who have studied cross-border medical tourism destinations. It highlights the reasons patients have expressed for seeking cross-border medical care.

**Table 1**  
*Comparison of Patient Motivations in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana for Seeking Care in the Mexican Border Region*

| Patient Motivations                       | Ciudad Juárez | Tijuana |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------|---------|
| Lower prices compared to the U.S.         | X             | X       |
| Lack of health insurance                  | X             | X       |
| Cultural affinity                         | X             | X       |
| Regulatory and oversight differences      | X             | X       |
| Medication acquisition                    | X             | X       |
| Greater specialization and quality abroad | X             | X       |
| Easier international travel arrangements  |               | X       |
| New cross-border insurance models         |               | X       |

*Source: Author’s compilation based on Escobedo and Cárdenas (2006); Macías and Morales (2001).*

The following tables provides statistical data on the counties of El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, California, offering insights into factors influencing the demand for medical care from patients crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

**Table 2**  
*Comparative Profile of Cities of Origin for Medical Tourism Demand in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana*

| Category of Analysis<br>(2022 Community Surveys) | El Paso, Texas | San Diego, California |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Total Population                                 | 865,657        | 1,386,932             |
| Median Household Income (\$)                     | 53,424         | 100,010               |
| Total Housing Units                              | 317,894        | 548,934               |
| Bachelor's Degree or Higher Education (%)        | 25.80%         | 51.20%                |
| Uninsured Population (%)                         | 21.90%         | 5.60%                 |
| Hispanic or Latino Population (any race)         | 715,351        | 411,286               |

*Source: Author's compilation based on United States Census Bureau data (2022).*

**Table 3**  
*Comparative Analysis of Implications for Medical Tourism Demand: El Paso, Texas vs. San Diego, California*

| Category of Analysis                      | El Paso Texas | San Diego California | Implications                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Total Population                          | 865,657       | 1,386,932            | San Diego has a significantly larger population than El Paso, suggesting a broader base of potential medical tourism consumers. However, El Paso's smaller population may indicate less local competition, potentially leading more residents to seek medical care in Ciudad Juárez.                                                   |
| Median Household Income (\$)              | 53,424        | 100,010              | El Paso's lower median income suggests a higher likelihood of residents seeking more affordable medical care in Ciudad Juárez. Meanwhile, higher incomes in San Diego may enable more residents to afford healthcare within the U.S., although some might still opt for cross-border options for cost savings on expensive procedures. |
| Total Housing Units                       | 317,894       | 548,934              | San Diego's larger housing stock and population suggest a higher and more diverse demand for healthcare services. Conversely, El Paso's demand for medical tourism might be more concentrated, driven by cost savings available in Ciudad Juárez.                                                                                      |
| Bachelor's Degree or Higher Education (%) | 25.80%        | 51.20%               | Higher education levels in San Diego may correlate with greater awareness of healthcare options, making residents more selective about treatment locations. In El Paso, lower education levels could correlate with a greater reliance on cost-effective care options, often found in Ciudad Juárez.                                   |
| Uninsured Population (%)                  | 21.90%        | 5.60%                | El Paso's significantly higher uninsured rate suggests greater demand for affordable healthcare services in Ciudad Juárez. San Diego's low uninsured rate implies that a larger proportion of its population has access to insurance coverage, reducing the urgency to seek care across the border.                                    |
| Hispanic or Latino Population (any race)  | 715,351       | 411,286              | El Paso's larger Hispanic or Latino population may have stronger cultural and linguistic ties to Mexico, making Ciudad Juárez a more appealing option for medical tourism. In San Diego, while the Hispanic population is also substantial, cultural ties may not drive demand as strongly as in El Paso.                              |

*Source: Author's compilation based on United States Census Bureau data (2022).*

**General Conclusion of Comparative Analysis:**

El Paso exhibits a socioeconomic profile that suggests greater dependence on medical tourism in Ciudad Juárez, driven by factors such as lower incomes, higher uninsured rates, and strong cultural connections with Mexico. On the other hand, San Diego, with its higher income levels, broader insurance coverage, and more educated population, may have relatively less demand for medical tourism in Tijuana. However, its larger population and proximity to the border still make it a significant market.

### **Panoramic Overview of Medical Tourism in Ciudad Juarez**

Ciudad Juarez is a city that, since the 20th century, has experienced a contrasting reality. On one hand, it boasts a robust economy centred on the export-oriented maquiladora industry, contributing to the growth of a significant middle class. On the other hand, the city faces challenges such as poverty and socio-spatial segregation. These issues are linked to a labour market characterized by low wages and urban policies influenced by speculative real estate interests, which have resulted in the expansion and dispersion of the urban footprint (Padilla, 2022).

Considering the need to seek options for the socioeconomic recovery of the Juárez - El Paso border region, which has undergone various development models over the decades, it is essential to design innovative and cutting-edge frameworks. Although trade, tourism, and the maquiladora industry have generated employment, they have not been sufficient to achieve comprehensive and sustainable social and economic development for the city. Therefore, establishing projects that drive progress in global areas is crucial, such as transforming Ciudad Juarez into a healthcare hub through the creation of medical tourism services.

Understanding medical tourism in Ciudad Juarez in depth is crucial for several reasons. First, Ciudad Juarez, due to its location on the border with the United States, has significant potential to attract international patients, particularly those seeking high-quality treatments at more affordable costs. Understanding this phenomenon can help identify opportunities to improve medical services and infrastructure, benefiting both patients and the local economy.

Moreover, a detailed analysis of medical tourism can reveal areas for improvement in health policies and intersectoral cooperation, promoting more cohesive and efficient development. This knowledge is vital for designing marketing and positioning strategies that allow Ciudad Juarez to compete effectively in the growing global medical tourism market. As noted by Guzmán (2021), reputation and commitment are part of the configuration of competitiveness models in the medical tourism industry, with significant innovations in medical facilities, management, hospitality, and traditional tourism amenities.

Ciudad Juarez is home to hospitals and healthcare infrastructure that have evolved to attract international patients, offering specific types of healthcare services in demand by patients from the neighbouring country.

According to TopDoctors.mx, the six best clinics and hospitals in Ciudad Juarez are:

**Table 4**  
*Six best clinics and hospitals in Ciudad Juárez*

| Number | Hospital                           | Category                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | Núcleo Dental                      | A clinic specializing in advanced dentistry, laser technology, and high-level implantology.                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 2      | Pulmonary Health Center Clinic     | A center specializing in sleep apnea, respiratory physiology laboratories, and pulmonary rehabilitation.                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 3      | Iniciar Clinic – Hospital Ángeles  | A specialized center for reproductive health, featuring a team of experts in the field of reproduction.                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 4      | Alegreto Laser Center              | A center specializing in advanced ophthalmology.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 5      | Hospital Ángeles Ciudad Juárez     | A high-level medical institution belonging to Grupo Ángeles, the largest private hospital network since 1986. They specialize in various fields such as pediatric allergology, endocrinology, plastic surgery, geriatrics, infectious diseases, critical care medicine, and more.                     |
| 6      | Star Médica Ciudad Juárez Hospital | A multidisciplinary private medical institution of high standing since 2000, part of Grupo Star Médica. Renowned as a top-tier healthcare provider, it offers specialties in plastic and reconstructive surgery, orthopedics and traumatology, pediatrics, general surgery, nephrology, among others. |

*Source: Author's own elaboration*

The proximity between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez is advantageous for the border market due to the closeness and the reduced risks it entails. Moreover, there is significant potential for medical tourism development, as 189,578 individuals in El Paso, Texas, lack health coverage in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2022).

**Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative approach to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and opinions of stakeholders involved in cross-border medical tourism in the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso region. A descriptive analytical case study design (Hernández-Sampieri, 2018) was used to assess the multiple perspectives of interviewees. Their lived experiences regarding specific events related to seeking medical care in Ciudad Juarez were analysed. The study emphasized observing naturally occurring circumstances in their immediate environments and contextualizing their biographical narratives. This approach provided insights into how participants construct their worlds and how these constructions are interpreted both by the participants themselves and by the researchers.

“The case study approach uses qualitative methods, as it can document the opinions of participants and stakeholders, integrate them into the process, and represent different program interests and values” (Simons, 2009: 32). The reports produced by the case study focused on themes composed of naturalistic observations and data obtained from interviews, written in the participants’ own words. This method allows for conclusions that others can recognize and use as a basis for informed action. After an exhaustive review of media outlets and policy discussions in the medical tourism sector of Ciudad Juarez and site visits to observe the sector’s complex dynamics firsthand, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 key stakeholders.

A non-probabilistic sampling method was employed, selecting participants based on specific criteria such as their knowledge of the research topic and their willingness to provide relevant and in-depth data. This type of sampling, known as “purposive sampling”, has been utilized in medical tourism studies by authors such as Hunter-Jones (2005), Rerkrujipimol, J. & Assenov, I. (2011), Crooks et al. (2012), and El-Jardali et al. (2012).

Based on the model by Caballero and Mugomba (2006) and Heung et al. (2010), who studied medical tourism stakeholders, the following categories were selected:

- Cross-border patients
- Healthcare and tourism professionals
- State and municipal government authorities
- Surgeons specializing in various fields
- Hospital administrators

The interviews were transcribed and reviewed to identify emerging themes, which were subsequently coded. The coding framework’s integrity was verified, and the data were analysed thematically.

Candidates

The sample comprised 18 individuals directly linked to the development of medical tourism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants, who met the following inclusion criteria: they either worked in or had recent knowledge or experience in public agencies, private companies, organizations, or institutions associated with providing healthcare services to medical tourism patients in Ciudad Juarez.

**Table 5**  
*Participants Sample Comprised*

| Category of Participants         | Interviews Conducted |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Hospital directors               | 3                    |
| Specialist doctors               | 4                    |
| Nurses                           | 2                    |
| State government authorities     | 2                    |
| Municipal government authorities | 1                    |
| Dental specialists               | 2                    |
| Hotel and motel associations     | 1                    |
| Cross-border patients            | 3                    |
| <b>Total</b>                     | <b>18</b>            |

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*

A document analysis of news articles about medical tourism was also conducted, and the data were thematically analysed (Terry et al., 2017) using an inductive and constructivist approach.

The study, carried out between November 2023 and April 2024, involved semi-structured interviews averaging 40 minutes, conducted at the participants' workplaces. As the interviews progressed, relevant information emerged about institutional conditions, policies, and programs influencing the development of medical tourism destinations, revealing key factors and limitations. Analysing governmental and institutional policies is essential to understanding the interactions between the public and private sectors in developing medical destinations. This study focused on how Ciudad Juárez has evolved as a medical tourism destination, who participates in its organization and development, and how they contribute.

To protect participants' privacy, interviewees were identified using the letter "E" followed by the interview number (e.g., E1, E2, E3).

## Results

### Quality and Variety of Medical Services

Ciudad Juárez offers a wide range of medical services, from highly specialized dental clinics and hospitals equipped with advanced technology to modest establishments providing basic care. Services such as cardiac surgery and neurosurgery are available in high-level facilities designed for international patients (E1). Most of the interviewees mentioned that patients are satisfied with the quality of services (E4, E6).

### Ease of Cross-Border Access

Most service providers are located near international crossings and offer immediate care, often at costs that allow patients to achieve significant savings (E2, E12, E16).

### Medical Infrastructure

Ciudad Juárez has modern hospitals and specialized clinics that provide high-quality care. These facilities are designed to attract international patients, featuring advanced infrastructure and top-tier services (E6). They offer specialized care in areas such as cardiac surgery, neurosurgery, and transplants, with high-quality services at elevated costs. These hospital facilities, built starting in 2007, were designed specifically for international medical tourism and clearly target international patients. Additionally, there are high-specialty dental services located near international crossings. These clinics and offices use the most advanced technology and materials, boasting aesthetically pleasing facilities and infrastructure. They are in visually appealing avenues, and the specialists have notable careers and international recognition for the quality of their professional services (E8).

### Evolution and Demand

Currently, patients from Canada are being treated at high-specialty dental clinics for dental implants and at new hospitals, especially for bariatric surgery. It can be affirmed that, in the medium term, the demand from Canadian patients may increase if security conditions and the quality of services offered in Ciudad Juárez improve (E1, E9).

### **Security and Collaboration**

Although efforts to enhance patient security and experience have been identified, collaboration between healthcare providers and the tourism sector remains limited, affecting the integration of the medical destination (E15, E4).

### **Complementary Services**

Most participants mention enjoying the local culinary offerings, highlighting the importance of gastronomy as part of the medical tourism experience (E13). "Enjoying the great food offered by the restaurants in Ciudad Juárez" (E13, E1, E6, E8).

### **Accessibility**

A positive aspect is market segmentation. Health service providers have developed a patient-focused approach, adapting marketing, products, and service delivery to the profile of their patients.

*"We have adjusted our service hours based on patient needs. Now we open at seven in the morning, allowing them to cross the international bridge faster and return when there are shorter lines"* (E12).

*"We have expanded our services to include van transportation that picks patients up in El Paso and takes them back after their appointments"* (E16).

## **Conceptualization of the Medical Tourism Destination Model**

### **Organic Model**

Medical tourism in Ciudad Juárez has emerged organically in response to service demand, with little structured planning. The service offerings have evolved spontaneously to meet patient needs (E2, E4). This model aligns with Vera Rebollo (2011), which states that as cross-border patient demand for medical care increased, hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, opticians, dental offices, laboratories, and diagnostic facilities emerged as business opportunities in a spontaneous manner, lacking structured and systematic planning elements. Some interviewees expressed doubt about whether this constitutes medical tourism, as the patient mobility or flow seeking healthcare in Ciudad Juárez has been a historical phenomenon, existing for decades before the concept of medical tourism was coined.

One participant stated:

*"Each hospital or doctor does not care about working jointly or in coordination because they do not fear running out of patients. That is, patients come on their own. Once they learn about the quality of services offered and the low cost it represents for them, they recommend the service to their family and friends"* (E2, E5, E9).

*"The demand for services has always existed, occurring naturally due to the border's proximity. We meet a need for care not found in their city"* (E4).

*"The demand is also characterized by patients, most of whom are Hispanic and part of the diaspora"* (E6).

Within this organic dimension, hospitals modestly located near international crossings were identified. They offer standard-quality services at lower costs than the city's major private hospitals. Their care focuses on basic specialties such as gynaecology, general surgery, internal medicine, and paediatrics. Their market consists of populations from nearby border counties, lacking planning, facilitators, and marketing strategies.

*"Patients seeking care in the city centre also visit Farmacias Similares, which offer consultations and studies at very low costs" (E7).*

For instance, the *Hospital de la Familia* serves over 30,000 cross-border patients annually, seeking quality service at low costs. Patient satisfaction is demonstrated through participant testimonials and the growing number of patients each year (E3). The *Centro Médico de Especialidades*, which offers consultations with renowned specialists, has built patient loyalty for over 70 years (E2).

### Planned Model

A structured planning model is proposed for the development of medical tourism, involving actor coordination and integrated strategies to enhance the destination's sustainability and competitiveness (Risteskia et al., 2012).

This model aligns with Risteskia et al. (2012) concept of destination management planning: a structured and systematic management system providing tourism organizations with tools to create sustainable and competitive tourism.

The planning process is developed after extensive research, consultation, feedback, planning, and review within the destination.

Modern hospitals such as *Ángeles* and *Star Médica*, with advanced infrastructure and effective marketing strategies, often exceed the expectations of Anglo-Saxon patients. These hospitals are major destinations for bariatric surgery patients from U.S. cities over 500 miles away (E6).

These results highlight the importance of service quality, infrastructure, cross-border accessibility, and costs in shaping Ciudad Juárez as a medical tourism destination.

### Discussion

The findings of this research are consistent with previous studies on medical tourism, which highlight its growing global importance. Like Lunt and Carrera (2010), Ebrahim and Ganguli (2017), and Junio et al. (2017), this research confirms that medical tourism responds to a demand for quality healthcare at more affordable prices. Similarly, Carrera and Bridges (2006) and Kim et al. (2019) emphasize that this phenomenon allows patients to access treatments and procedures that would otherwise be inaccessible in their home countries due to high costs, long waiting times, or lack of specialization. This study also supports the idea that medical tourism fosters international competition in the healthcare sector, leading to improvements in service quality and innovation in healthcare delivery. However, in line with the concerns raised by Crooks et al. (2019), it must be noted that the commodification and export of private healthcare services, driven by perceived economic benefits, could exacerbate inequities in access to healthcare and have negative effects on human

resources in the receiving countries. Despite these challenges, medical tourism remains a phenomenon with a significant economic impact, as noted in this research, generating substantial income for receiving countries and promoting the development of healthcare and tourism infrastructure. The transnational exchange of medical services not only benefits patients but also strengthens global health collaboration, facilitates access to advanced technology, and contributes to the development of a more equitable and efficient global healthcare market. One key aspect that emerges from this research is the relevance of the functionality of borders in meeting the healthcare needs on both sides of the border. The geographic and cultural proximity between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso facilitates a constant flow of patients seeking quality, affordable medical care. This cross-border interaction allows people from the United States, especially those without adequate health coverage or with high insurance costs, to access medical services that would otherwise be unfeasible in their home country. The proximity of medical services in Ciudad Juárez, combined with cultural and linguistic familiarity, provides an environment where patients can receive efficient, high-quality care without the inconveniences of long travel or language barriers, highlighting the strategic importance of borders in strengthening medical tourism. In this way, borders not only facilitate patient mobility but also create a transnational support network that addresses the healthcare needs of both countries, optimizing resources and improving access to healthcare. This scenario contributes to the emergence of the organic model of medical tourism in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, a phenomenon that has evolved naturally due to the constant demand for affordable, quality medical services in the border region, without formal planning, but driven by the immediate needs of patients and the smooth interaction between both cities.

Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez share certain characteristics as border cities that attract medical tourism; however, there are significant differences between them. Tijuana has positioned itself as one of the main hubs of medical tourism in Mexico, benefiting from its proximity to major urban centres in California and a long history of promoting this sector. In contrast, Ciudad Juárez, despite its potential, has developed an organic medical tourism model that is less structured and primarily driven by patient demand. This organic growth highlights Juárez's ability to adapt to the needs of cross-border patients, particularly from Texas and New Mexico. Unlike Tijuana, where the medical tourism industry is well-established with extensive infrastructure and marketing strategies, Juárez relies more on its competitive advantages, such as cost-effectiveness, quality of care, and cultural and linguistic proximity to U.S. patients. These elements underscore the unique relevance of Ciudad Juárez in the medical tourism sector, as it offers a viable alternative for patients seeking accessible and efficient medical services in the border region.

### Conclusion

It is concluded that borders exhibit a distinct type of medical tourism, where healthcare services are the primary factor in deciding to seek care in another country. This type of medical tourism does not focus on combining vacations or tourist activities with medical care but rather on meeting an urgent need for accessible, high-quality, and affordable treatment nearby. Furthermore, most medical tourists visiting the border are satisfied with their experience, as they recommend the services to their family and friends, according to the various service options analysed in this research.

The study concludes that healthcare providers are reaching a broad range of patients due to the diverse market segments represented, considering income and health status. The cost of services, the type of treatment required, and market research conducted by the participating stakeholders

show that the destination offers a clearly differentiated product. This differentiation is due more to the geographical and cultural proximity to the patients' cities of origin than to deliberate planning and strategy, highlighting the lack of investments and the absence of active and integrative policies. Most of the demand for cross-border healthcare services in Ciudad Juárez is organic, driven by the healthcare needs of predominantly Hispanic individuals without health insurance coverage or with prohibitively high deductibles in the U.S., who prefer to pay for services in Ciudad Juárez because they are more affordable.

The organic nature of medical tourism in this region offers several significant advantages. Firstly, it reflects genuine and consistent demand fuelled by the real needs of patients, particularly those from the United States who face barriers in accessing medical services. This steady demand provides a solid foundation for the sector's growth and sustainability. Additionally, the focus on quality healthcare, combined with geographic and cultural proximity, allows Ciudad Juárez to position itself as a unique and differentiated medical destination. The medical services offered here not only address patients' urgency and needs but also exceed their expectations in terms of quality and cost, creating high levels of satisfaction and loyalty among patients. Another advantage is geographic proximity, as patients requiring surgery and post-operative follow-up can return home without the need for long journeys that could jeopardize their recovery.

However, to maximize the potential of this sector, it is essential for stakeholders to recognize the importance of collaboration and coordination. While competition does not currently appear to be a significant concern, establishing integrative policies and joint marketing strategies could further strengthen Ciudad Juárez's position as a leading medical tourism destination. Collaboration between healthcare providers and the tourism and hospitality sectors is crucial to offering patients a complete and satisfying experience.

Organic medical tourism in Ciudad Juárez represents a differentiated product that responds to a real and growing need. Its development and strengthening can not only improve patients' quality of life but also drive the economic and social growth of the region. Seizing this opportunity requires a strategic and collaborative approach, ensuring that Ciudad Juárez continues to be a reference in the field of cross-border medical tourism.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this research work. No funding or incentives have been received from any external sources that could influence the development, results, or conclusions of the study. All content and analyses presented are independent and based solely on the data collected during the research.

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