



Local Tours In Achieving Competitive Superiority In Medical Tourism: The Case Of Aksaray

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Abstract

Aim: The main purpose of this research is to examine the importance of local tours in order to gain competitive advantage in the medical tourism sector.

Methods: In-depth interview technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in the data collection process. The research was carried out on the entire Aksaray province universe and the interviews were held in Aksaray province center. Data were collected in April 2019. Within the scope of the study, interviews were held with Aksaray University officials, Aksaray Training and Research Hospital officials, Aksaray Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Aksaray Provincial

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Tourism Directorate, Aksaray Provincial Health Directorate, representatives of private hospitals throughout the province and travel agencies with a total of 20 participants

Results: 55% of the participants are represented by public institutions and organizations, 40% by private institutions and organizations and 5% by non-governmental organizations. According to the data obtained, it was concluded that Aksaray province has health tourism potential and local tours are an attractive option in medical tourism. Aksaray's tourism potential is supported by its historical and cultural elements. However, the lack of development of medical tourism is due to reasons such as lack of projects, unconsciousness, lack of investment and funding. Aksaray has the equipment that can provide competitive power in the field of medical tourism and is suitable for development.

Conclusion: Aksaray's tourism potential needs to be integrated with health tourism, coordination among stakeholders and a strategic plan should be created. It is obvious that Aksaray will develop more economically and socially if it fully utilizes its potential in the field of medical tourism.

Keywords: Medical Tourism, Local Tours, Competitive Advantage, Tourism Potential

INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Turkey has made significant progress in terms of accommodation capacity, the number of tourists coming to the country and tourism revenues since 1980. Today, mass tourism, coastal tourism called sea-sand-sun, has become commonplace and lost its former importance and brought negative results as well as positive economic contributions to the country. The concretization of the beaches and the pollution of air and sea water in cities with coasts are the main negative consequences. For this reason, many countries in the world tend to turn to alternative tourism in addition to coastal tourism (Karamustafa et al. 2009).

Alternative tourism consists of alternative tourism branches that emerged as opposed to coastal tourism. Health tourism, which is a branch of alternative tourism, has gained importance in recent years and has become an important source of income. While the average income of foreign tourists coming to our country in mass tourism is 750-800 dollars, the average income of tourists coming for health tourism is 8500 dollars (SATURK 2016). This difference shows that there is a serious potential for the country to increase tourism revenues in health tourism.

Health tourism can be defined as traveling from the place of residence to another place for the purpose of health, protection and improvement of health and treatment of diseases and staying at the destination for at least 24 hours and benefiting from health and tourism opportunities. The

person traveling for the stated purposes is also called a “health tourist” (Karsavuran et al. 2013: 17-18). Health tourism activities are basically gathered under four dimensions as medical tourism (medical tourism), thermal tourism, elderly tourism and disabled tourism (Karamustafa, 2016:1).

Among the reasons for patients to go abroad in health tourism are low cost, quality, lack of services in their own country, their absence or prohibition, geographical proximity or cultural connections. It has been reported that geographical proximity, service quality and low cost are among the reasons why medical tourists prefer our country (Binler, 2015). Therefore, one of the biggest factors underlying the development of medical tourism is the price differences between countries and the provision of better quality health services at a cheaper price.

Medical Tourism

The unplanned and uncontrolled growth of mass tourism has created some negativities such as the deterioration of ecological balance, intense concretion and pollution in tourism destinations. For this reason, it has been stated that the reasons such as reducing these negative effects of mass tourism, spreading tourism over 12 months and increasing the income obtained from tourism cause the emergence of alternative tourism types (Unur et al. 2012). Medical tourism is travel to other countries for treatment purposes. Although the primary purpose is "treatment", patients also benefit from the services provided by the tourism sector such as accommodation, food and beverage, transportation and travel programs (Tengelimoğlu, 2013). In medical tourism, which includes many types of treatment within the fields of oncology, in vitro fertilization, cardiovascular surgery, organ transplants, aesthetic operations, dental, eye, urology and similar fields, people want to save on treatment costs, not to wait in line to get health care, and to avoid some illegal medical services . they receive treatment outside their own country for reasons such as having procedures (abortion, gender reassignment, euthanasia, etc.) (Yavuz, 2011).

International patients are defined as people who request international health services to solve any health problem or to become healthier. International patients can be evaluated in three groups: medical tourist, tourist health and health for refugees. The main difference between medical tourist and tourist health is that the first is the main purpose of travel, and the second is other activities such as entertainment or business (Tontuş and Nebioğlu 2018). While the main reason for travel in medical tourism is to benefit from health services, when it comes to tourist health, it is stated that the health services they receive in tourism destinations depending on the

health problems that may occur during their travels due to other motivations (Karamustafa, 2016). Especially, people who have to endure long waiting times for treatment or operation, as well as high treatment expenditures in their own countries, are increasingly participating in these travels (İçöz, 2009).

Eric Cohen has made a different classification in terms of the classification of demand in the medical tourism market. According to Cohen, tourists are divided into five basic classes in medical tourism (İçöz, 2009:2261):

Only tourists are those who do not benefit from any health services in the country they visit.

Tourist treated on vacation are tourists who receive health care or treatment as a result of any accident or illness during their travel.

Tourists for vacation and treatment purposes are those who do not go to the region they visit for medical treatment, but receive health care if there is a possibility of treatment for some of their ailments.

Vacation patients are mainly tourists who go to the region they visit to receive health care and treatment. They do it on vacation in the region where they go after recovery or after treatment.

Only the patients are the tourists who stated that they went to the region where the tourists in this group went only for the purpose of getting treatment and health services, and they did not have the purpose of taking a vacation.

When we look at Eric Cohen's classification, it is seen that local tours in medical tourism fall into the category of patients on vacation. Because it is thought that offering health services as an enriched product to the tourist whose purpose is to receive health care will both increase the interest of the tourist and increase the competitiveness of the health institution in the market.

Its infrastructure facilities, accredited health institutions, quality health services, specialist doctors, advanced technology and plastic and aesthetic surgery, hair transplant, eye surgeries, in vitro fertilization, open heart surgery, skin diseases, checkup, cancer treatments, otolaryngology, dialysis The fact that almost all kinds of treatment such as cardiovascular surgery, gynecology, neurosurgery, orthopedics, dentistry, spa, physical therapy and rehabilitation are offered in our

country with reasonable and competitive price advantages shows that Turkey has a greater share in medical tourism day by day . , 2009: 2271).

While Turkey hosted 169 thousand 462 patients in 2012 within the scope of medical tourism, it is seen that the estimated income of these patients approached 2 billion dollars in total in the public and private sectors. In the 10th Development Plan prepared by the Turkish Ministry of Development, it has been estimated that 750 thousand medical tourists will come to Turkey in 2018 and will leave an income of 5.6 billion dollars (Ministry of Health Turkey Medical Tourism Evaluation Report, 2013: 78).

According to the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), the number of visitors coming to our country for health purposes in 2015 was 260 thousand 339 people (Dinçer, Çifçi and Karayılan, 2016:41). According to the analysis carried out by the Agency Interpress based on the data recorded by the Health Tourism Council of Turkey, the number of foreign tourists who came to our country for health purposes in the 11-month period of 2017 (January-November) was 751,000.

Local Tours in Medical Tourism

In accommodation businesses operating in the tourism sector, *the core product (main benefit)* expresses the general function of the service provided and is the reason for the existence of the business. The main benefit of the product provided by the accommodation establishments may be only the accommodation service, or it may also include elements that can create consumer benefits such as entertainment, rest and nutrition, depending on the characteristics of the establishment. *The tangible product (facilitating services)* is very important in the fulfillment of the activities of the accommodation establishments. In the absence of facilitating services, the main benefit may not usually be achieved. For example, the absence of a reception or food and beverage services can eliminate the competitiveness of the business. Within the scope of *enriched products (supporting services)*, they are elements that are not always necessary to provide services for the main benefit, but increase competitiveness. It is usually done to differentiate the product (Karamustafa et al. 2010:16).

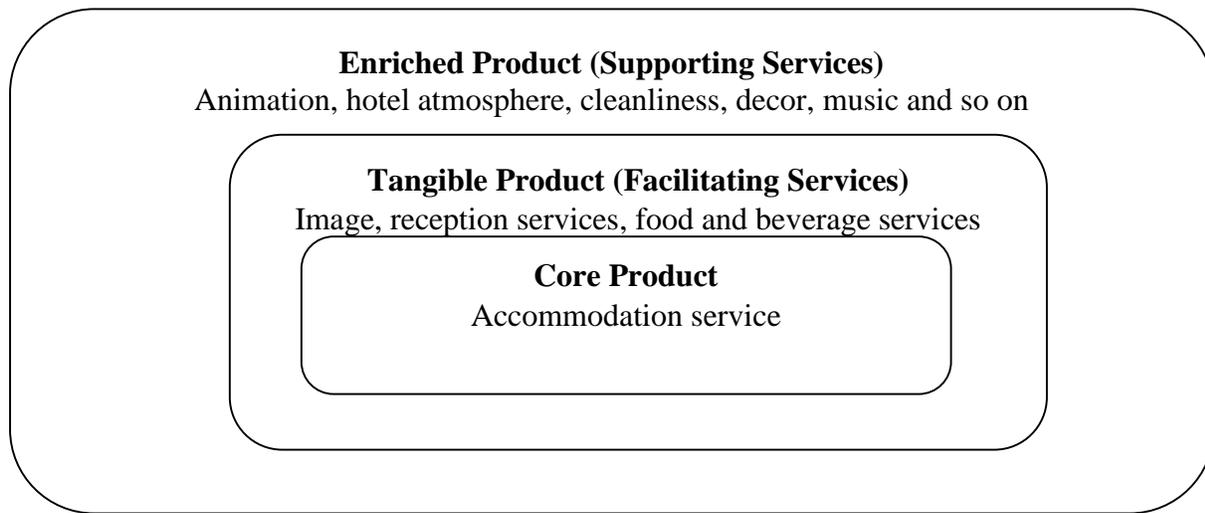


Figure 1. Product Types in Hospitality Businesses

Reference: İslamoğlu, Candan, Hacıfendioğlu and Aydın (2006:18).

Within the scope of the conceptual framework given above, the service that provides the main benefit to the consumer, which is essential in medical tourism, is the health service. In addition to the health service provided in the health institution, services such as accommodation, food and beverage services are considered as facilitating services, while local tours of the region from which they receive health services can be offered to the consumer as a supportive service. It is thought that local tours will increase the competitive power in the field of medical tourism.

An important development in this regard is the plan to offer a 5-day tour service during the treatment with tour packages to be arranged for medical tourists from the USA and European countries, thanks to a project carried out jointly by a private eye center in Kayseri with an agency. It is planned to provide services such as Cappadocia trips, skiing and cultural trips in the services included in these tours (İçöz, 2009:2272). This is an indication of how local tours will be integrated into medical tourism.

Local tours are package tours that offer medical tourists local culture, natural beauties, traditional tastes and other touristic experiences. Such tours enrich the medical tourism experience and provide tourists with an unforgettable holiday experience. Local tours enable medical tourists

to explore the region and become familiar with the local culture and lifestyle outside of the treatment process. This allows tourists to prefer the destination more and make return visits.

The role of local tours in creating competitive advantage in medical tourism is multifaceted. Firstly, local tours increase the attractiveness of the destination by offering tourists the cultural and touristic values of the region as well as health services. The fact that tourists benefit from touristic activities at the same time while receiving health services enables them to experience different experiences offered by the destination.

Secondly, local tours show that medical tourists tend to extend their vacation periods. A medical tourist's participation in local tours to explore the region after receiving health care extends the duration of his stay and thus contributes to the regional economy. This can increase employment opportunities while stimulating the growth of local businesses and the tourism sector.

Finally, local tours are an effective tool for the promotion and marketing of a medical tourism destination. Local tours that offer touristic experiences differentiate the medical tourism destination from other destinations and offer a unique experience to the target audience. This is an important factor in promoting the destination and gaining competitive advantage.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the study is to examine the importance of local tours in order to gain competitive advantage in the medical tourism sector. The sub-purpose of the study is to evaluate the suitability and sustainability of Aksaray province for medical tourism. For these purposes, the hypotheses of the study are "Local tours have competitive power in medical tourism." and "Aksaray province is adequately equipped as a medical tourism destination." determined as. During the study, in-depth interview technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in data collection.

In-depth interview technique is one of the most common methods used in qualitative research techniques. This method can be done individually or in groups. In this study, the one-to-one interview technique conducted between the researcher and the participant was used. With this method, the researcher can learn the participant's ideas about a subject down to the last detail. In the study, the number of participant samples can be determined in a very small number compared to other techniques in obtaining data (Craig & Douglas, 2005).

In the in-depth interview technique, the researcher must have a good level of communication and listening skills in order to collect data well. Communication ability is related to the researcher's direct and clear communication of questions to the participant. Listening ability is related to hearing, recording and understanding the answers given by the participant correctly. The researcher, who cannot manage the interview process well, cannot reach quality and potential data. For this reason, communication and listening skills are of great importance in research conducted with the interview method (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2002).

The universe for the research was determined as the whole Aksaray province and the interviews were held in Aksaray city center. Data were collected in April 2019. In this context, interviews were held with Aksaray University officials, Aksaray Training and Research Hospital officials, Aksaray Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Aksaray Provincial Tourism Directorate, Aksaray Provincial Health Directorate, Private Hospital representatives and travel agencies throughout the province. In the study, a total of 20 participants were interviewed. The interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes. 2 of the participants were Aksaray University officials, 5 Aksaray Training and Research Hospital officials, 1 Aksaray Chamber of Commerce and Industry official, 1 Aksaray Tourism Provincial Directorate official, 3 Aksaray Provincial Health Directorate officials, 5 Private Hospital officials and 3 of them are travel agency officials.

55% of the participants are from public institutions and organizations, 40% are from private institutions and organizations, and 5% are from non-governmental organizations.

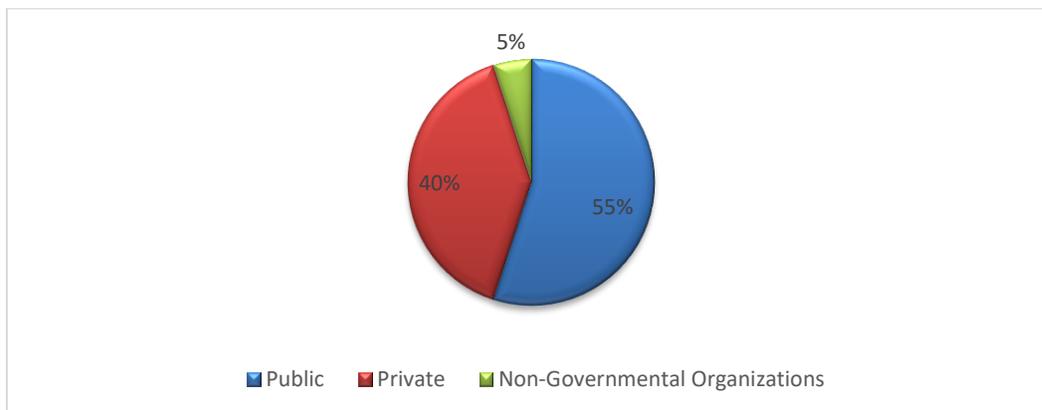


Figure 2. Distribution of Participants.

The interviewed participants were asked, "What are the activities that can be done within the scope of local tours in the province of Aksaray? Does the province of Aksaray have sufficient infrastructure as a destination in terms of medical tourism? Can local tours be given to health tourists as a package with the health services provided in medical tourism? Do local tours increase the competitiveness of medical tourism? "Do you host medical tourists in your hospital? Is Aksaray a center of attraction for medical tourists? If not, what can be done to become one?" The questions that will draw the framework of the study were prepared in advance, and detailed questions were asked during the interview, depending on the situation, and the subject was tried to be examined in depth.

2. ANALYSIS

In this section, the findings obtained from the answers given by the participants to the questions created for the purpose of the study with the in-depth interview technique are summarized.

Theme: Competitive Advantage in Medical Tourism: The Role of Local Tours

Sub-Theme 1: Medical Tourism and Destination Selection

- Factors affecting the destination selection of medical tourists.
- The role of local tours in creating attraction for medical tourists.

Sub-Theme 2: Enriching the Medical Tourism Experience of Local Tours

- Presentation of local culture, natural beauties and traditional tastes.
- Integration of touristic experiences with medical tourism.

Sub-Theme 3: Competitive Advantage in Medical Tourism and the Effect of Local Tour Packages

- The effect of local tour packages on the preferences of medical tourists.
- Increasing the competitiveness of medical tourism destinations by local tours.

Sub-Theme 4: Aksaray Province and Medical Tourism Potential

- Tourism potential and health services capacity of Aksaray Province.
- The potential of regional tours to gain competitive advantage in Aksaray's medical tourism.

Sub-Theme 5: Obstacles and Suggestions for Solutions

- Factors hindering the development of medical tourism.
- How can local tours be used to gain competitive advantage in medical tourism?

First of all, during the meeting with Aksaray Training and Research Hospital and private hospital officials throughout the province, "Do you host medical tourists in your hospital? What is the

general profile of these tourists?" An answer was sought to the question, and in the answers given, it was said that no tourists came within the scope of medical tourism. It has been stated that health services are provided to health institutions providing health services in Aksaray province , mostly to foreign patients of Middle Eastern origin, such as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, who have a residence permit or do not have a residence permit. It has been stated that patients of Far East origin such as China and Japan are provided with health services within the scope of tourist health, but it is underlined that this process is not within the scope of medical tourism. In addition, it has been said that a great deal of health care is provided to expatriate patients of Turkish origin, who come from European countries such as Austria, the Netherlands, England and Belgium, the majority of whom live in Germany, especially during the summer months. When these situations are evaluated together, it is understood that the health service activities in question are not evaluated within the scope of health tourism.

The question "Can Aksaray province be a center of attraction in terms of health tourism? What can be done to become one?" was asked that Aksaray could be very comfortable as a health tourism centre. It has been stated that general surgery operations such as surgeries, advanced metabolic surgery, obesity surgery, and plastic surgery can now be performed easily, and there are both technological equipment and professional human resources in this regard. In fact, health care in branches that require advanced expertise such as open heart surgery in neighboring provinces such as Nevşehir and Niğde. It was stated that the province of Aksaray should start its medical tourism activities as soon as possible. It was also stated that a project was submitted to the Ministry of Health in this context. Again, in order for Aksaray to be a center of attraction in terms of medical tourism, there is a need for specialization in other specific branches. It has been stated that these specialization branches will attract many health tourists if they are advertised and promoted well.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Health has taken this issue seriously for the last ten years and a department has been established within this scope, that the political authorities in Aksaray should step into this area and raise awareness on this issue, both non-governmental organizations and public institutions, media or social media. Announcing health tourism through channels, the private sector's involvement in the subject, the creation of projects and their presentation to the Ministry of Health, and cooperation as a team with travel agencies that will market it well are expressed as activities that will enable Aksaray to become a center of attraction in health tourism.

"What are your ideas about the activities that can be done within the scope of the local tour in Aksaray?" The first answer to the question is Ihlara Valley, which is a very convenient canyon for trekking, and visiting the frescoed churches in the valley, showing places such as Sarathl underground cities, which are quite abundant in the region, showing natural and historical places in Güzelyurt Gelve, Hasandağı Nora Antique City, Hasandağı Winter Sports tourism center, Sarıyahşi Hirfanlı tourism center and boat tours, Hasandağı paragliding activities, Sultanhanı inn and caravanserais, the city's natural beauties, cultural or historical places such as Salt Lake are the services that can be provided to the health tourist individually or as a package tour within the scope of local tours. has been done.

"Can the health services provided in medical tourism and local tours be given to health tourists as a package?" It was stated that the activities stated in the previous question, question 3, can be given to the health tourist easily. Within the scope of health tourism, health tourists who come for surgical interventions such as hair transplantation, dental implants, eye surgeries can be shown the cultural and historical places of the city and their natural beauties can be shown. On the one hand, while improving his health, on the other hand, he can take a vacation to relieve his stress and fatigue. It has been stated that the facilities provided in this regard are in the position of a 5-star hotel and the cost of the service provided is important.

"Do local tours increase competitiveness in medical tourism?" In response to the question, all participants stated that they would definitely increase it. In particular, due to the natural beauties and historical places of Aksaray province, registration, transfer, bringing to the accommodation facility, promotion of the city in the presence of multilingual guides, getting health services and returning to their country in a healthy way are a situation that is desired to be within the scope of medical tourism. Participants stated that Aksaray is a city that pleases people who come to their senses, that it should be promoted properly, that it has a lot of natural beauties, that it is a city that satisfies people in terms of Seljuk artifacts, caravanserais, Salt Lake tours, paragliding, history, culture and nature. Expressing that it is a sustainable tourism activity, they specifically stated that all these activities will increase the competitiveness of medical tourism among peer hospitals and surrounding provinces.

Table 1. Distribution of the Number of Tourists Visiting the Cappadocia Region by Years

| 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 2.689.949 | 2.851.543 | 2.608.073 | 1.493.493 | 2.206.372 |
| 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
| 2.949.542 | 3.834.134 | 962.124 | 2.285.895 | 3.970.909 |

Reference: Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2023)

The number of tourists visiting the Cappadocia Region shown in Table 1 is substantial and it is stated that approximately 4 million tourists visited the Cappadocia Region in 2022. Considering the integration of this number with medical tourism, it is estimated that tourism revenues from medical tourism will be quite high.

"Does Aksaray province have sufficient infrastructure as a destination in terms of medical tourism?" 5 of the participants answered no to the question, while 15 of them answered yes. This situation is visualized in Figure 3. Participants stated that the potential is quite high, however, the lack of qualified and quality facilities as a lack of infrastructure, lack of projects, lack of sufficient awareness, and lack of investment hinder the feasibility of medical tourism in Aksaray.

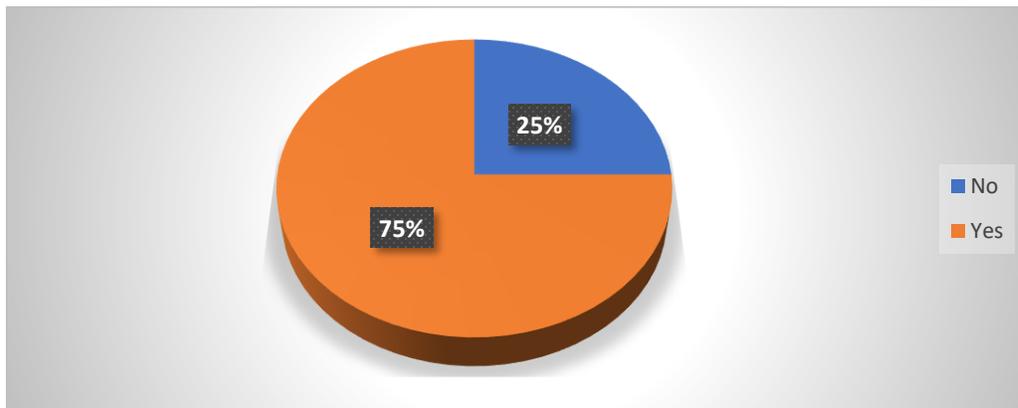


Figure 3. Whether Aksaray Province Has Sufficient Infrastructure in terms of Medical Tourism Destination

Finally, the reasons for the lack of development of medical tourism in Aksaray and the problems encountered were asked. Participants primarily stated that medical tourism could not be realized due to the lack of funds and the absence of projects. In addition to these, political authorities do not have enough information about the subject, lack of awareness, lack of qualified facilities in terms of eating, drinking and entertainment, lack of sufficient investments, lack of transportation, promotion, domestic and foreign marketing activities, health service providers and travel agencies

or reasons such as lack of coordination among its stakeholders are stated as obstacles in front of medical tourism activities in Aksaray.

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The tourism sector is among the sectors where Turkey can gain a competitive advantage by using its tourism potential. Its tourism potential and advantages indicate that Turkey will come to better positions in terms of tourism in the future (Gökdayı and Polat 2015). In addition to coastal tourism, Turkey is also very rich in terms of the feasibility of many alternative tourism types. In this context, the tourism potential of each province and each region in Turkey is different. In this study, basically, "Local tours have competitive power in medical tourism." and "Aksaray province is adequately equipped as a medical tourism destination." hypotheses were tested. In addition, the tourism potential of Aksaray province was tried to be revealed and the following results were obtained:

It has been stated before that this issue, which has a great contribution to the country's economy together with its sub-branches, is now considered important by its stakeholders. It has been understood from the interviews and the data obtained that Aksaray should get a share of this cake. For this reason, health service providers in Aksaray should act as soon as possible for health tourism activities. Because Aksaray is one of the most touristic destinations of the Cappadocia Region with its historical and cultural elements and natural beauties.

It has been stated that if medical tourists start to come to Aksaray, if this service is provided together with local tours, every tourist who comes to Aksaray will definitely leave satisfied. In this respect, it has been understood from the data obtained that Aksaray has the potential to provide competitive advantage in health tourism activities, develop a sustainable health tourism activity and become the market leader of the region. For this reason, it is of great importance for the economy of Aksaray and the country's economy that the necessary investments are made, the necessary projects are developed, all political and administrative authorities take the issue into consideration, and that both the public and private sectors take this business seriously.

From the data obtained for the reasons explained above, "Local tours have competitive power in medical tourism." hypothesis was accepted. Because, when the health service to be provided within the scope of medical tourism is presented to the health tourist as an enriched

product (supportive service) together with local tour packages, it has been concluded that it will both increase its attractiveness and increase the demand.

Another hypothesis of the study, "Aksaray province is adequately equipped as a medical tourism destination." hypothesis was accepted. From the data obtained, it has been concluded that there have been important developments in the field of health services in the province of Aksaray in recent years, that medical tourism can be done, that there is a newly opened public health facility in the comfort of a five-star hotel, and that there are private health facilities that can compete in the national market. For this reason, it has been understood that Aksaray has sufficient equipment as a medical tourism destination, especially in the fields of heart surgery, obesity and metabolic surgery, and aesthetic surgery.

According to the data obtained from the interviews, the reasons for the lack of development of medical tourism in Aksaray are primarily listed as lack of projects, lack of awareness and awareness, lack of investment and funding, lack of accommodation and hotel services at the required level, lack of promotion and advertising activities, transportation problems . These reasons are shown in Figure 4.

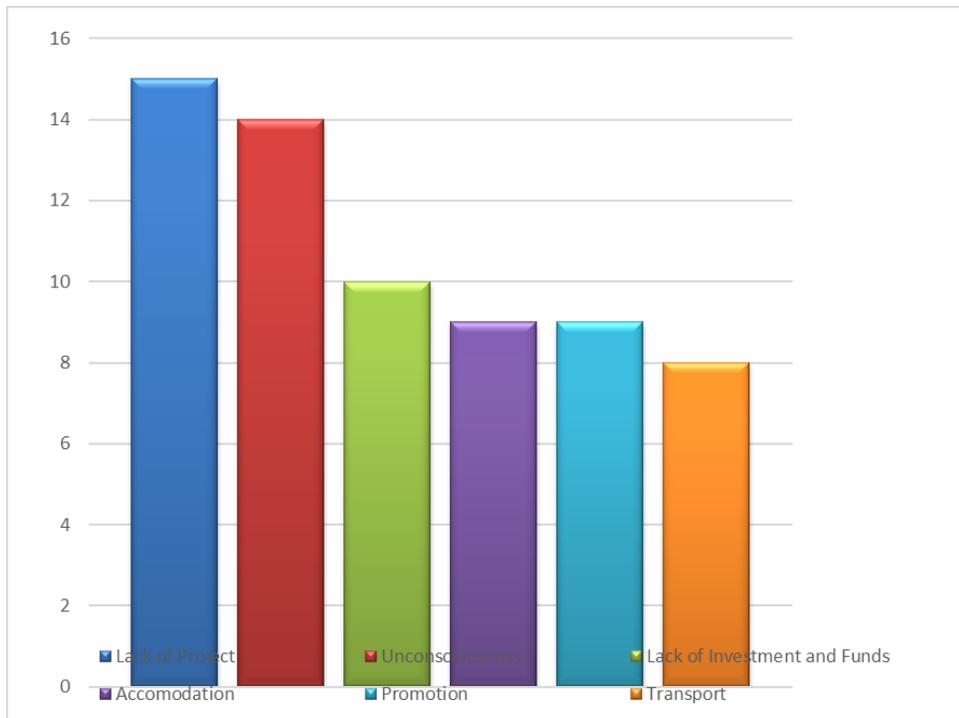


Figure 4. Reasons for the Non-Development of Medical Tourism in Aksaray Province

Figure 5 shows Aksaray's natural beauties, historical structures, tourism opportunities that will provide competitive power, and tourism opportunities that can be given as a package in medical tourism.

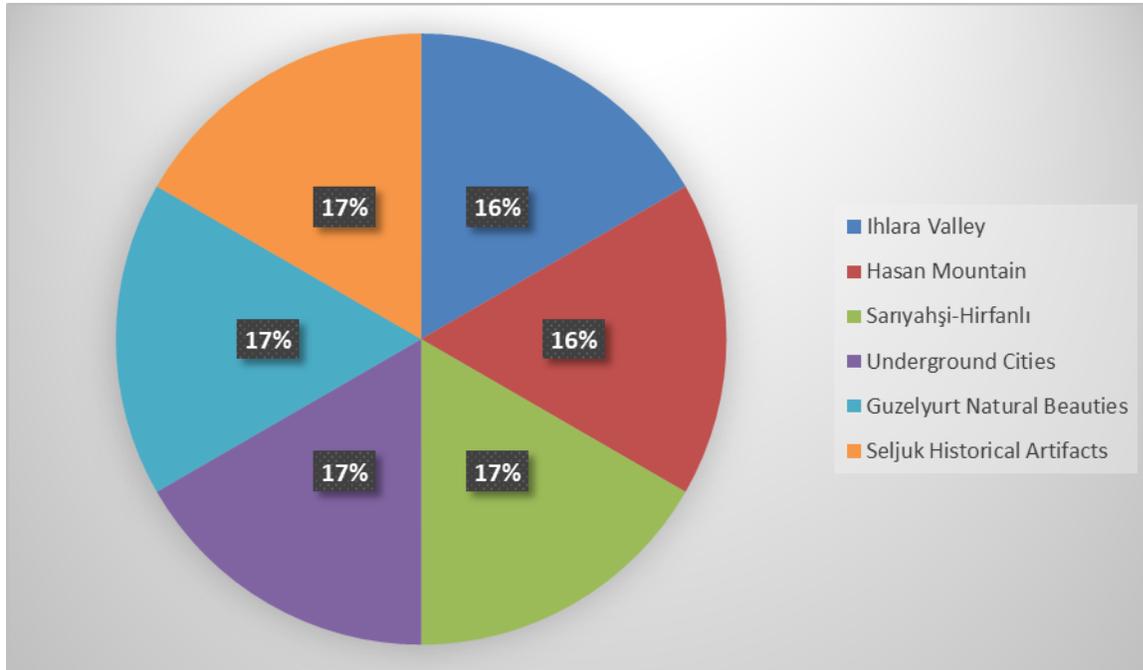


Figure 5. Tourism Opportunities of Aksaray Province

As a result of the interviews made as the suggestions of the study, this potential of Aksaray, which is very rich in terms of both historical monuments and natural beauties, should be integrated with health tourism, and this situation should be turned into an opportunity by making use of these features that currently attract tourists in the field of health tourism. Therefore, all stakeholders have a responsibility here. The common emphasis of the interviewed participants is that the potential of Aksaray has not been fully evaluated and realized. It is estimated that the region and Aksaray will develop both economically and socially as soon as the potential is realized. For this reason, it is necessary for every sector to take up this issue and take advantage of this potential.

In this context, it is necessary to create a detailed strategic plan by removing the identified obstacles to the feasibility of medical tourism in Aksaray as soon as possible. As stakeholders, the necessary awareness and awareness should be created by ensuring coordination between health service providers, public administrations, political authorities, municipalities and culture-tourism

institutions, travel agencies, and Aksaray province should get its share from the medical tourism cake.

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