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Abstract

1. With the progressive implementation of the Single European Market, public interest has in the last few years been increasingly directed towards cross-border healthcare services. The present situation has two particular characteristics. First, more and more dentures are being imported into Germany, and, second, patients themselves are becoming ever more mobile, travelling to other countries to receive prosthetic treatment from local dentists.
2. The price differential between Germany and other countries has contributed to the establishment of a market for foreign dentures and the creation of the phenomenon of “dental tourism”. Underlying this trend is patients’ and dentists’ desire to take advantage of the price differential between Germany and other countries and thereby to save money. For this reason, dental tourism is sometimes described as an example of “cost-based health tourism”.
3. Patients’ individual preferences for foreign dentures and the potential savings thereby envisaged were determined by means of a dedicated questionnaire comprising 22 specific questions. The field work (conducted in April and May 2008) took the form of a representative omnibus survey involving a net total of $n = 1368$ interviews with subjects in the age range 30–75 years. The sample composition was weighted by regional distribution, size of place of residence, sex and age, using data derived from official statistics.
4. The project methodology was that of a willingness-to-pay study in the field of health economics. Measurement of a potential client’s willingness to pay reveals the respondent’s individual preferences in terms of how far he or she is prepared to spend a given sum on his or her health while correspondingly restricting expenditure on other goods and services. The aim is first and foremost to construct a health-economics-based model of a patient’s subjective cost-benefit assessment in deciding for or against dentures of foreign origin.
5. The results are analysed by the “contingent valuation method”. For this purpose the respondents are confronted with a hypothetical market on which they are presented, as potential consumers, with various decis-

- on situations each involving a different supplementary payment which they must contribute. The contingent valuation method is characterized by the scenario technique.
6. The study provides for four treatment scenarios, to be assessed by the respondents in a “bidding game”. The options were a “crown scenario” (three separate crowns on posterior teeth with a hypothetical contribution of 400 euro by the patient) and an “implant scenario” (one anterior-tooth implant with a hypothetical patient contribution of 1300 euro), the patient in each case also being asked to choose between “foreign dentures” (fitting of imported dentures) and “dental tourism” (prosthesis fitted abroad).
 7. Analysis of individual willingness to pay for foreign dentures, as determined empirically, shows that the relative valuation of the foreign denture and dental tourism treatment options varies markedly among the population. A good indicator of this situation is the extremely wide dispersion of the results for individual willingness to pay in all four scenarios.
 8. The proportion of respondents opting in the bidding games for the German variant and hence rejecting the foreign variant, even with total freedom to pay a supplementary charge, was calculated as falling within the range 25% to 65% for the individual scenarios. Hence the decision for or against foreign dentures seems to be of a fundamental nature for a high proportion of the population, the main factors militating against the cheaper foreign option being scepticism about quality, uncertainty as to guarantee provision and the relationship of trust with the patient’s own dentist.
 9. However, the fact cannot be overlooked that many respondents, when considering the scenarios of “foreign dentures and dental tourism”, opted sooner or later for the foreign alternative. The “average price” threshold at which respondents opted for foreign rather than German dentures was determined mathematically to be 30–35% below the calculated German price in the case of “foreign dentures” and 40–50% below that price in the case of “dental tourism”.
 10. Direct comparison revealed a preference for the “foreign denture” option over “dental tourism”; this was observed both in the prevalences found and in the average results for willingness to pay. Average willingness to pay for the dental tourism option in the crown scenario was calculated as 80 euro less and in the implant scenario as a good 280 euro less. The dental tourism option necessarily entails a change of dentist and higher transaction costs (travelling expenses and time), which respondents must allow for in making their decision.

11. The correlation between the social patient-dentist relationship and willingness to switch to a less expensive dentist was highly significant and proved, in the multivariate regression analysis too, to be the principal determinant in a causal explanation of the variance of willingness to pay for foreign dentures. Where a relationship of trust extending over many years has obtained between patient and dentist, the patient's decision for or against foreign dentures is modified by his or her personal preferences.
12. Quality is a vital factor in the decision for or against foreign dentures. For instance, respondents stated quality aspects to be the decisive criterion appreciably more frequently (92.4%) than the favourable cost of the dentures (31.1%).
13. The importance of clinical quality is strongly emphasized by the German dental profession too. In the accompanying online survey of $n = 300$ dentists, 29% of respondents specified poor, questionable or unknown quality of foreign dentures as the main reason for rejection of this treatment option. Only 10% of the dentists surveyed explicitly assumed that foreign dentures would be of good quality.
14. It fits well that only 12.3% of the respondents in the online survey stated that they often work with foreign dentures. 49% of the dentists, however, actually do not work with foreign dentures at all.
15. All in all, the analysis clearly shows that the decision for or against foreign dentures depends on a range of criteria, of which "price" is ultimately only one; the "patient-dentist relationship" and "scepticism about quality", for example, are independent aspects of the patient's decision.
16. The results overall indicate that foreign dentures constitute a small but dynamically growing segment of the market. The proportion of the population treated with foreign dentures is likely to increase over the next few years.