

Swiss Luring Russians to Visit for Treatment

By [Carey Sargent](#)

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GENEVA — Switzerland is encouraging wealthy Russians who ski at resorts from St. Moritz to Zermatt to return this season for medical checkups or surgery.

Potential patients were given brochures last winter recounting how Vladimir Lenin, founder of the Soviet Union, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, author of the "Gulag Archipelago," found asylum in the Alpine nation.

Medical tourism revenue may climb almost fivefold to 5 billion Swiss francs (\$5 billion) by 2020, said Jan Sobhani, director of Zurich-based Swixmed, which arranges treatment for foreign patients. That's equal to almost quadruple last year's exports of chocolate and cheese.

"For serious conditions we, and most of our friends, travel abroad," said Yelena Petrova, whose 2-year-old son Andrei has flown five times from Moscow for kidney surgery and checkups at Zurich's University Children's Hospital. "I absolutely recommend it."

While about 60 percent of medical tourism revenue is linked directly to the health care system, additional income is generated through tourism.

Patients often travel with at least one relative and stay in luxury hotels such as Zurich's five-star Baur au Lac, Sobhani said. Switzerland plans to broaden its campaign next year by persuading Arabian Gulf visitors to emulate United Arab Emirates President Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahayan, who received undisclosed treatment in August.

"These are mostly very privileged people," Sobhani said. "Our clients start in what I would call the upper middle class and go right up to people who are so rich you can't even imagine."

Swiss Health, a joint venture between the country's tourism and foreign trade offices, distributed about 6,000 of the nine-page brochures at Swiss ski resorts including Davos, Klosters, St. Moritz and Zermatt over the lengthy Russian New Year's holidays in January. They highlight Switzerland's doctors, the "best in the world," as well as the country's reputation for quality and historical links to Russia.

About 800 students study the Russian language in the country, which also boasts the "longest pedestrian shopping streets in the world," the brochures say.

"Switzerland is still too little-known as a provider of medical services, even though the medicine is top-class," said Gregor Frei, head of Swiss Health. "There's enormous potential."

Unlike the cut-price medical treatment offered in places such as India and Thailand, Switzerland focuses on state-of-the-art procedures that are not always available elsewhere, said Peter Kappert, president of Swiss Leading Hospitals, a Baar-based association of private clinics.

The Zurich hospital chosen by Petrova was the world's first to use ultrasound to kill brain tumor cells without cutting open the skull. The family was charged 60,000 francs for the keyhole kidney surgery that resulted in Andrei, 11 months old at the time, being able to stand in his bed two days later, Petrova said.

While the Swiss doctors employed a technique involving three 5-millimeter cuts, Russian surgeons would have used a more invasive procedure that involves making a 4-centimeter incision. Andrei would have needed at least six months to recover, Petrova said.

About 5 percent of the 12,000 patients admitted to hospitals last year by Genolier Swiss Medical Network came from abroad, a "much higher" proportion than five years ago, said managing director Antoine Hubert. They often receive "tailor-made solutions" and generate as much as 15 percent of the company's revenue, he said.

"Foreign patients profit from our wellness offer and hotel services and often come accompanied with family members, who also stay at the clinic," he said. "Foreign patients generate more income and profit than a Swiss private patient."

With Switzerland attracting billionaire patients, including Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, hospitals are developing amenities such as the 250-square-meter presidential suite at Genolier's flagship clinic, which overlooks Lake Geneva and Mont Blanc. The suite offers "all the comfort and privacy" that these patients request, Hubert said. He declined to

disclose the rates.

Switzerland — whose life expectancy of 81.7 years is bettered only by Japan, Hong Kong and Iceland, according to United Nations figures — has a long history of attracting foreign patients, including Thomas Mann's wife Katia, whose treatment at the former Waldsanatorium in Davos was the basis of the 1924 book "The Magic Mountain."

Viktor Yushchenko, former president of Ukraine, was treated for dioxin poisoning at the University Hospital of Geneva in 2004, and former Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko received prostate cancer treatment in the country in 1996.

Medi-Clinic's Hirslanden Private Hospital Group, Switzerland's largest private health care provider, is seeking annual growth of about 10 percent in foreign patients within the next five years, spokeswoman Alenka Ambroz said. Hirslanden, which runs 14 clinics from Lake Constance on the Austrian border to Lake Geneva on the frontier with France, is collaborating with hospitals in Jeddah and Dubai to lure patients.

While Switzerland ranked second after Austria for health infrastructure in Lausanne-based IMD's 2010 World Competitiveness Yearbook, the treatment offered in the United States and Germany is of a similar standard, said Keith Pollard, managing director of Intuition Communication, a Britain-based health care researcher. Tourism may give the Swiss an edge, he said.

"Patients are looking for the best surgeons, hospitals and treatment," he said. "Going somewhere they find attractive is a bonus."

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