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**ORGANIZATION OF
INTERNATIONAL
MEDICAL CONGRESSES
AS POSSIBILITY FOR
EXTENDING CROATIAN
TOURIST OFFER**

ABSTRACT: Organization of international medical congresses is a perfect example of multidisciplinary cooperation with professional medical associations and Medical schools on one side and professional congress organizers on the other. Medical congresses are perhaps most frequent congresses in the world. Organization of medical congresses can be achieved in a number of ways: Organizers can be local professional associations or Medical schools, international professional associations and international professional congress organizers. To be nominated for organization of a congress, successful cooperation of medical professionals is needed, especially doctors and professional congress organizers. Success largely depends on knowledge of the availability of conference halls, available accommodations in the vicinity of the congress halls, ease of access to the congress destination, expectancies of possible candidates who will attend in connection to the congress destination, lobbying for nomination for organization of a congress. This article will

analyze availability of conference halls in Croatia, accommodation capacities, transport possibilities. For the needs of this article, pilot questionnaire was constructed about demands of possible participants and their preferable destinations to be visited. Statistical analysis of Medical congresses in Europe is also shown according to geographical spreading. Concluding the article, we show that better education of medical staff about the possibilities of professional congress organizing are very important, as well as sharing of the experiences from big congresses among the medical professional in the field of medical congress organization. With multidisciplinary approach of all participants in organization of the congress (Ministry of Tourism, Croatian Tourist Association, Croatian Associations of professionals in congress tourism, hotels, medical professionals) Croatia could be much better recognized as destination for organizing medical congresses.

KEY WORDS: congress tourism, medical congresses, multidisciplinary cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

Despite excellent cohesion among scientists through communication channels, gatherings through meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions – MICE are still very popular and expanding. The same applies to medical assemblies which are held globally on daily bases. In Croatia, only there are more than 140 professional companies within Croatian Medical Association (HLZ, n.d.) along with an unknown number of associations which hold conferences in Croatia. Together with associations and professional companies, education is carried out by medical schools and pharmaceutical firms. In September only, Croatian Medical Chamber has received 41 applications for meetings and conferences (HLK 2016). Likewise, we can mention a large number of professional congress organizers (PCO). Croatian Medical Association, on its web page, provides reference to 53. (HLZ, n.d.) Unfortunately, with such a number of companies and associations we still cannot be satisfied with the number of international meetings and congresses which take place in Croatia. We will refer to this subject more in this article. Relevant literature mostly mentions destinations and the way congresses are organized; very little reference is given to the methods and ways that need to be completed, such as preparation for bidding process through which congress organization is awarded. A series of factors are required for the organization of international assemblies and they not only include good destination, good professional congress organizer, but also medical professionals who will contribute to organizing European and world congresses in Croatia with their knowledge, abilities and international activities.

TYPES AND METHODS OF ORGANIZING MEETINGS AND CONFERENCES IN ACCORDANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS AND CONVENTION ASSOCIATION (ICCA) (ICCA, N.D.)

The international meetings market can be segmented in many different ways. It can be segmented by the size of the meetings, by the kind of people who visit the meetings, by the purpose of the meetings and by many more criteria.

Two primary markets can be defined as the corporate market and the non-corporate market. The latter consists of international governmental organizations and international nongovernmental organizations or associations.

In terms of size, budget, duration and complexity there are massive variations among and also within categories.

However, some similarities can be identified:

- ☞ Almost every ‘specialty’ has an association which holds one or more meetings.
- ☞ Most associations have meetings that take place at regular intervals. These can be annual, biennial etc.
- ☞ The destinations rotate. They rarely return to the same destination within a very short time-span.
- ☞ The initiative to host a meeting often comes from the local counterpart, e.g. the national association. If that body is difficult to motivate to organize the meeting, the chances are high that the meeting will be scheduled elsewhere.
- ☞ Association meetings have a very long lead time; it is not unusual to find lead times of 5 years or more.
- ☞ It is estimated that a growing minority of about 25-30% of the decision-making processes no longer include an official bidding procedure, but have a “central initiator” who selects the location and venues based on pre-determined and strict criteria.

TABLE 1. WORLDWIDE AND EUROPEAN RANKING: NUMBER OF MEETINGS PER COUNTRY IN 2015 (ICCA, N.D.)

	WORLD COUNTRY	NUMBER OF MEETINGS	EUROPE COUNTRY	NUMBER OF MEETINGS
1	USA	925	Germany	667
2	Germany	667	United Kingdom	582
3	United Kingdom	582	Spain	572
4	Spain	572	France	522
5	France	522	Italy	504
6	Italy	504	Netherlands	333
7	Japan	355	Portugal	278
8	China	333	Austria	258
9	Netherlands	333	Belgium	216
10	Canada	308	Turkey	211
41	Croatia	96	21 Croatia	96

It is noteworthy to point out that medical meetings make up the larger share in all assemblies organized worldwide.

STATISTICAL DATA FOR NUMBER OF MICE IN THE WORLD

One of the best statistical sources is the International Congress and Convention Association. The last data for 2015 ranks Croatia in the 43rd place with only 96 events out of 12,078 in total. This is only 0.79% of the total number of congresses. Table 1 shows classification of first ten countries in the ranking worldwide and Europe. In Europe, Croatia is ranked 21st according to the number of organized events. Berlin is a city with the largest number of held events, 195 congresses, whereas Zagreb falls into the 65th place, Split holds the 109th place, Dubrovnik is number 240 and Zadar is ranked 360th. In Europe, Zagreb shares the 35th place with Ljubljana. Dubrovnik is ranked as 61st, Split 125th and Zadar 184th.

TABLE 2. WORLDWIDE RANKING: NUMBER OF MEETINGS PER CITY IN 2015 (ICCA, N.D.)

	WORLD CITY	NUMBER OF MEETINGS
1	Berlin	195
2	Paris	186
3	Barcelona	180
4	Vienna	178
5	London	171
6	Madrid	171
7	Singapore	156
8	Istanbul	148
9	Lisbon	145
10	Copenhagen	138
64-65	Zagreb	41
109	Dubrovnik	25
230-254	Split	10
335-373	Zadar	6

**TABLE 3. VIENNA MEETING REPORT FOR 2015
 (NUMBER OF EVENTS, PARTICIPANTS AND
 OVERNIGHTS)**

Number of events	3,658
National congresses	649
International congresses	743
National corporate events	1,049
International corporate events	1,244
Number of participants	531,631
National congresses	116,972
International congresses	270,581
National corporate events	51,538
International corporate events	92,540
Number of overnights	1,682,966
National congresses	118,488
International congresses	1,275,910
National corporate events	67,596
International corporate events	220,972

Source: <http://www.vienna.convention.at/>, n.d.

TABLE 4. TYPE OF EVENT ORGANIZED IN 2014

	TOTAL	BUSINESS MEETINGS OF CORPORATIONS/COMPANIES	BUSINESS MEETING OF ASSOCIATIONS/INSTITUTIONS
Number of meetings	8,031	5,141	2,890
Number of participants	551,055	314,279	236,776

Source: <http://www.dzs.hr/>, n.d.

TABLE 5. BUSINESS ENTITIES IN 2014

	BUSINESS ENTITIES	HALLS	SEATS
Total	473	2,262	256,434
Hotels and other accommodation establishments	432	1,921	200,751
Universities, fair, cultural institutions and convention centres	41	341	55,683

Source: <http://www.dzs.hr/>, n.d.

Tables 1 and 2 show Croatia's and Croatian cities' ranking in the world and in Europe by the number of congresses held.

European ranking of Croatian cities is: Zagreb 35-36, Dubrovnik 61, Split 121-130, Zadar 167-185.

One of the most detailed analysis of events according to number, type and earnings, is that from Vienna. We will show only two tables from that Report. Table 3 shows the number of events, number of participants and participant overnights for year 2015. Table 4 shows financial information of organized assemblies. Readers may obtain more information on: <http://www.vienna.convention.at/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?nodeguid=0529a8c5-8a68-4978-ae33-dd121b90853d>.

As far as events in Croatia are concerned, we have limited data from Croatian Bureau of Statistics that do not help us to get the whole picture of the situation in Croatia, and thus there is a need for specific measures to be taken in order to obtain comprehensive information.

TABLE 6. NUMBER OF MEETINGS AND PARTICIPANTS IN 2014

	TOTAL	NATIONAL	INTERNATIONAL
Number of meetings	8,031	6,271	1,760
Participants	551,055	3,061,112	244,943

Source: <http://www.dzs.hr/>, n.d.

Table 4 shows type of event organized in Croatia, Table 5 business entities and Table 6 number of participants on events.

Comparative analyses of data from Vienna and Croatia point out to the fact that there is plenty of room for better organization and attraction of domestic and foreign participants. Unfortunately, it also shows that Vienna by itself hosts annually the same number of participants as the entire Croatia. It also shows that Vienna has twice as many foreign participants as domestic ones in international congresses. More detailed analyses of congresses held in Croatia are needed to determine where the number of international congresses could be increased. At the same time, we should work on organization of events that can assemble a larger number of participants at a single congress. Average number of participants on congresses in Vienna is 144, whereas in Croatia it is 78.

WHAT CROATIA MAY OFFER?

In accordance with the National Program for Development of Congress Tourism offered by the Croatian Ministry of Tourism, in Croatia, there are 120 three- to five-star hotels with about ten halls with 600 to 1,000 seating places and a few centres. Zagreb-Hypo, Forum, Zagreb Fair, theatres, faculties, chambers, sports arenas... (www.mint.hr/, n.d.).

But after taking a closer look at congress halls, accommodation capacities and geographic position of the destination, suitable places to hold larger congresses is greatly reduced.

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to organize a larger congress (more than 1,500 participants) without extra expenses (additional hall equipment – Zagreb Fair, transport cost – sport arenas...). At the same time, if we can find a hotel with a hall big enough, it usually cannot offer enough smaller halls for parallel sessions.

When looking at hotels with bigger halls we should take into account that the ever-increasing number of organizers insist on four-star hotels, and this is becoming a rule (EU, EU Projects, Pharmaceutical companies, etc.).

According to data from Business Tourism portal we shall try to analyse the present situation regarding halls (size and number of additional halls) and their respective capacities (<http://www.poslovniturizam.com/>, n.d.).

Four-Star Hotels

- a) Two halls with 300 to 500 seats (possible formation of booths), three additional with up to 20 seats. No data regarding total accommodation capacity.
- b) One hall with 450 seats (possible formation of booths), two halls with up to 50 seats, 151 rooms, remaining capacity in apartments.

Five-Star Hotels

- a) One hall with up to 1,000 seats, one hall with 105 seats, six halls with up to 100 seats, 201 rooms, distance from other hotels more than ten kilometres.
- b) One hall with up to 1,000 seats, two halls with 100 seats and four halls with less than 100 seats, surrounding hotel capacities satisfactory.

For comparative analyses of all congress capacities we need far more time and space, but the above

information alone shows that it is very difficult to select a suitable destination with enough accommodation capacity in the target hotel and hotels in the vicinity.

Another feature that makes organization of bigger congresses difficult is the limited number of additional halls with more than 100 or 200 seats. If we add to the above that most congress halls are utilized also for gala events for congress participants, we can see how difficult it is to set up a good scientific program for a congress as most of bigger congresses or other assemblies with planned sessions also include parallel sessions which need additional halls or use of a big hall during afterhours thus making the organization difficult.

TRAFFIC CONNECTIONS

When selecting a destination and a date for a congress, especially international congress, it is of outmost importance to take into account the distance from the closest airport, as well as the frequency of air connections. Croatia, especially Dubrovnik, has big issues in this respect. Low cost flights to coastal destinations are available only during summer. Out of summer season, Dubrovnik does not have direct flights from European countries. This in fact limits organizers to schedule congresses on dates during pre-tourist season which increases the cost of accommodation capacities.

PARTICIPANTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD OPTING FOR CONGRESSES WHICH THEY WILL ATTEND

For this paper needs, a pilot survey was taken. Participants were members of WONCA Working Party on Rural Practice mailing list (rural family medicine physicians). 49 members around the world took part in the survey, most from Europe, four from Asia, five from North America and three from South America. Questions were

grouped according to organization of a congress and destination. Regarding the organization, the theme of the congress was most important (rated 4 on a scale 1 to 5), conference date (rated 3.8), and organizer (rated 3,4). Regarding the destination of a congress, cost of transportation was most important (average rate 4), safety and cost of accommodation (rated 3.4).

Despite a small number of participants as well as the nonexistence of adequate surveys we consider that there is a need for more extensive market research. Considering that safety is one of the more important components for making a decision on which congress to attend, Croatia presently has an advantage over most of European destinations. The same applies for cost of accommodation because the overnight prices in Croatia are much lower than the prices in other European congress destinations. (Here also more detailed analyses are needed.)

We offered survey participants a list of cities in Croatia to choose according to which cities they would like to visit most. Results are shown in Picture 1.

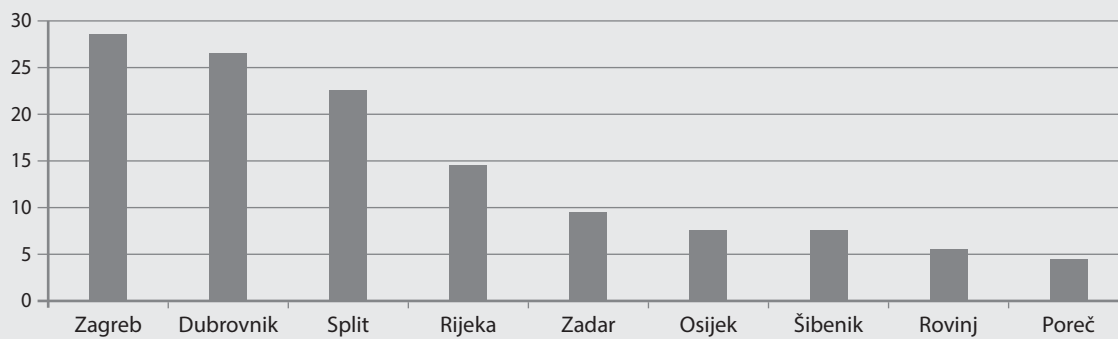
The picture shows that Zagreb is best recognized as a destination for MICE, Dubrovnik and Split are not far behind. Istria and Šibenik are surprisingly poorly positioned and this needs some investigation through surveys with larger targets and versification.

ORGANIZATION OF A CONGRESS FROM A PERSPECTIVE OF MEDICAL CONGRESS/EVENT ORGANIZER

We can review several types of medical congresses:

- 1) National and international courses
- 2) Thematic conferences
- 3) National conferences
- 4) National conferences with international participation
- 5) International conferences

PICTURE 1. PARTICIPANT PREFERENCES REGARDING CROATIAN DESTINATIONS



There are several characteristics of organization of medical conferences. In regard to financial aspects of a conference we can mention:

1) Conference fees which are covered in full by a participant (this is mostly the case with international one- to three-day licensed courses; there are few courses which take longer than that. They are relatively expensive for Croatians (above 200 Euros – due to utilization of mannequins for simulation).

2) Conference fees which are covered in full by a sponsor (here we have a range of conferences from “educational” lunches and dinners at the place of participants’ residence, to lectures which promote single medicament, and weekend educational meetings mostly organized on the Adriatic coast).

3) National conferences which are mostly organized by professional companies and associations. There are also national conferences with international participants. Fees are covered mostly by several sponsors. These conferences are also attended by specific exhibitors who pay for their exhibition space and/or sponsors’ lectures or arrival of specific number of participants. These aspects are important for several reasons:

a) It is necessary to carefully select the conference destination and ensure enough space for exhibitors/

sponsors (it is very important to provide exhibitors with most adequate exhibition area).

b) According to the ethical code of innovative pharmaceutical initiative, we have strict rules for selection of a congress destination (up to four-star hotels, advertising methods of a congress in print and on-line, sponsoring participants...) (<http://ifi.hr/kodeks/>, n.d.).

4) International conferences

International conferences are a special challenge for a congress organizer as well as for PCO. First of all, it is necessary to win the bid for congress organization! This part is not mentioned in the Croatian National Strategy for Congress Tourism (www.mint.hr/, n.d.).

Even if a perfect destination with perfect facilities for the congress is offered, one still has to win the bid for the conference.

Conferences are mostly obtained by bidding which are announced by international organizations that wish to organize a congress. Such congresses are held periodically, often once a year, once every two years, once in three years or once in four years (depending on the organization). Most of the well-organized organizations have precisely set

rules which apply to candidacy. WONCA Europe (European Association of Family Doctors) is one of the examples (<http://www.woncaeurope.org/>, n.d.).

Candidates bidding for congress organization must be extra careful when:

- a) Selecting a destination;
- b) Selecting a topic;
- c) Selecting key-note speakers;
- d) Presenting the destination;
- e) Lobbying for congress.

Above points show that the organization of international conferences presents most challenging part of MICE because multidisciplinary cooperation is vital.

The role of the organizer (association) that was awarded the organization of a congress is very important. Its representatives should be familiar with rules of organizing international congresses, which would ensure good cooperation with PCO and at the same time, good organization of a congress. This can be achieved through participation in congresses, on-line examination of abstracts and activities in scientific and organizational boards of international congresses. All of the mentioned roles require knowledge and lobbying skills as well as financial assets. High participation fees (500 euros and above) for international congresses make attendance difficult without which acquaintances and lobbying is not possible.

Perfect destination in itself is not enough to bid for congress organization. Good presentation and acquaintance with decision-makers is also crucial to be awarded organization of such a congress.

Here we would like to mention a case of Polish colloquies who pointed out during bidding that their key-note speaker will be a high-ranking person from the World Bank.

Term "leadership" is often mentioned in medical circles not only among management but also

among medical practitioners. Such knowledge can only help in bidding for congress organization.

All of the abovementioned indicates that a systematic approach to congress organization is needed; long-time planning is also crucial as well as involving as many professionals as possible to educate those who will be able to successfully apply for a bidding to organize a congress. Education of doctors and nurses in international economy and health diplomacy, lobbying for organization of congresses, cooperation with all relevant organizations in Croatia, selecting excellent key-note speakers and education in congress organization in general are main goals for improving the organization MICE.

Once the organization of a major international congress has been won, the role of experienced PCO is priceless to organize a congress in the best possible way. It is crucial to find (or create) a suitable and simple program to receive and evaluate abstracts. Working on the conference program is probably the most demanding task, because on every major international congress there are parallel sessions, often exceeding the number of 10 or 20. It is important to know who is who to avoid possible embarrassments among VIP persons; seating arrangement is also crucial, and so on...

A statement from a colleague in Canadian Medical Journal mentions how much care for every detail must be taken during the organization of a congress: "The long coffee and lunch breaks indicated fine brains on the organizing committee." (<http://cmajblogs.com/>, n.d.).

To conclude, it is very important to take into account timely and well-presented application to the Croatian Medical Chamber (every participant is awarded points which are needed for his or her renewal of medical license), and for international points, to the European Union of Medical Specialists (<https://www.hlk.hr/>, n.d.).

UEMS has strict rules for application of congresses which must be followed or points will not be awarded by this organization.

Another way of obtaining the organization of international congress is through big international PCO corporations. A lot of large international associations have their own PCO organizers, which are able to attract a large number of participants. An example is a recently held Congress of European Association for Study of Diabetics with 17,000 participants, with Interplan PCO or European Respiratory Society with several thousand participants and K.I.T. as PCO. Perhaps it would be possible to attract one of such firms to come to Croatia.

Presently, we do not have information on this type of congress organization (probably due to the lack of collectable statistical data), although we have information that there were congresses in Croatia organized by large international PCOs.

CONCLUSION

The association market covers a wide range of meeting types and categories: medical meetings (the largest segment); scientific; other academic; trade organisations; professional bodies; social gatherings.

Croatia, as one of most attractive and safest destinations in the world, still does not take advantage of, nor does it develop its capacity for

organization of MICE in full. Most destinations where MICE are organized have excellent three-to five-star hotels, well equipped halls, but only up to 1,000 seats. In Croatia, we also have a large number of good PCOs. What we are presently missing is at least one large congress centre which could organize events with several thousand participants similar to those in cities of similar size to Zagreb (Vienna, Munich), better traffic connections, especially flights outside the tourist season. Even if we improve all these issues, we will still be missing organization skills and knowledge to successfully apply and bid for organization of major international congresses, which requires investments (attending international conferences), education of medical professionals and others in positioning and lobbying with the aim to win the organization of major congresses. We should not neglect international corporations. Another possibility is a more intensive involvement of the Croatian tourist community and the Ministry of Tourism and cooperation with major international PCO organizations, which could enable organizations of international congresses in Croatia.

Finally, we need better analyses of certain congress tourism destinations, which already offer excellent capacities for MICE. These include Istria, Zadar and Šibenik. A multidisciplinary approach to this issue is of great importance and further efforts would bring better results.

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