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Explanation of challenges to health tourism development from the perspective of managers: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: One way to achieve development is to expand the health tourism industry and remove its barriers. This study was conducted to explain the challenges to the development of health tourism from the perspective of managers in Ardabil province.

Material and Methods: The present study is a qualitative study with a contractual content analysis approach. Participants were 18 key knowledgeable managers about tourism and health tourism. The purposeful sampling method used to select participants. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed simultaneously, and themes were explored in 2023.

Results: Based on the findings of this research, seven main themes and several subcategories were investigated and identified as follows: 1) inadequate infrastructure for medical tourism; 2) ineffective governmental policies, regulations, and tariffs; 3) inadequate or subpar management practices; 4) inefficient healthcare professionals involved in health tourism; 5) lack of involvement of travel agencies in promoting health tourism; 6) absence of global information and limited involvement of local and national mass media; and 7) presence of unregulated and nonspecialized brokers.

Conclusion: Managers face major obstacles to health tourism development in the province, causing economic and social damage. A better understanding of these barriers is necessary for effective planning and interventions to reduce harm and promote development.

Keywords:

Medical health policy, health tourism, tourism, tourists

Introduction

Achieving growth and development is the dream of all societies and countries, and different ways and tools are always used to achieve this goal.^[1]

One way to achieve development is to expand the tourism industry.^[2] Today, the tourism industry has become one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors in the world. Its impact extends beyond economic

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and business aspects. To attract tourists, countries focus on socioeconomic development and infrastructure growth.^[3] Tourism has evolved into specialized branches such as cultural, sports, adventure, religious, and health tourism. Health tourism has been popular among ancient communities like Iranians, Romans, and Greeks. Iran has been a leading center of health tourism in the Middle East.^[4] Health tourism is a formal and specialized branch of international tourism that focuses on the controlled use of natural healing factors and physical therapy to enhance and maintain the quality of life and health.^[5] Wellness tourism, as defined by Puczkó-Smith, aims to balance various dimensions of an individual's life, including physical, mental, emotional, employment, intellectual, and spiritual aspects. Rather than focusing on healing, it prioritizes prevention through lifestyle-based therapies and other methods.^[6] Health tourism is a form of tourism that focuses on physical health while also improving mental and spiritual well-being. It helps individuals satisfy their own needs and increases their capacity to function better in their environment and society.^[6] Health tourism plays an important role in the development of sustainable tourism by reducing seasonality and diversifying tourism services as a whole.^[7] In most cases, the goal of health and medical tourism is to benefit from lower prices for medical services or to receive services faster in other parts of the world.^[8] Medical tourism has been a part of Iran's Ministry of Health for 16 years, since 2003. However, the government's goal to provide 30% of the country's medical needs through medical tourism and export of goods and services has not been met by the end of the Fourth Development Plan.^[9] Ardabil province in northwest Iran, bordering Azerbaijan and several other provinces, boasts stunning natural landscapes, particularly its hot springs and minerals. These natural wonders have been used since ancient times to treat illnesses.^[10] The Ardabil province offers cultural and historical sites as well as tourist attractions that promote the region's tourism and health tourism industries. However, urbanization and industrial growth have led to an increase in physical and mental illnesses. The tourism industry can be effective in promoting health and national identity as well as creating jobs, increasing income, and reducing poverty. Despite the natural and mineral springs and surgical centers in the area, there is limited research on health tourism development in Ardabil. Specialized and reputable physicians are key in attracting health tourists.^[11-14] Heung *et al.*^[15] (2010) identified various obstacles to health tourism, including laws and regulations, government support, local community spending and medical needs, past poor experience, concerns about dissatisfaction with accommodation and hospitality, inadequate transportation, terrorist attacks, and disagreement of family members. A study conducted in Iran found that

branding, coordination of medical tourism institutions, and intersectoral institutions and policy makers were the top three priorities for developing health tourism.^[16] Another study identified three categories related to health tourism: challenges and benefits, human interaction and communication, and international standards.^[17] The demand for healthy tourism is influenced by various factors such as lower prices, better quality of treatment, cultural and linguistic considerations, easy access to information, inadequate health insurance, advancements in technology, alternative medicine, new treatment methods, growth in aviation, hotel and telecommunication industries, and patient information confidentiality.^[18] Morvati, Sharifabadi, and Asadian Ardakani (2014) emphasized that the development of health tourism in Yazd province requires a strong commitment to meet the needs of patients seeking medical care. To achieve this goal, it is essential to invest in modernizing hospitals and enhancing the skills of hospital staff.^[19] According to Mazloumi and Jalali, the tourism industry faces significant challenges due to ineffective communication systems, inadequate physical infrastructure, and substandard accommodations.^[20] Iran's ability to attract foreign tourists is influenced by infrastructure facilities; historical, religious, and natural potential; and political and economic conditions. This information was reported by Akbari and Abu Nouri in 2015.^[21] Goodarzi *et al.*'s^[18] study found that quality, culture, facilities, and information and communication technology have a positive relationship with the growth of medical tourism. However, price has a negative impact on this development. Momeni K *et al.*^[22] conducted a study that identified several barriers to the growth of medical tourism, including marketing, international issues, culture, transfer, brokerage, management, and policy problems.

The current study aims to analyze and identify the existing obstacles in the path of developing health tourism in Ardabil province. This is due to the insufficient number of research studies conducted on this topic and the barriers to tourism development in the region. Senior managers, members of the tourism specialist group, and heads of educational-medical hospitals and other tourism service providers in the province will be consulted for their perspectives.

Materials and Methods

Study design and setting

This study had two phases: qualitative phase and quantitative phase. The qualitative phase included interviews and analysis and exploration of the main codes. Thus, this qualitative study using the content analysis approach was employed to identify the challenges of health tourism in the Ardabil province. The second stage of the project, which will be tool making, has not been prepared yet.

Study participants and sampling

Eighteen individuals participated in a study that aimed to ensure a diverse range of participants in terms of age, gender, education, job roles, and managerial experience. Participants were selected based on having more than 3 years of management experience, being 30 years of age or older, and having management experience for more than 1 year. The selection process involved senior managers, members of the tourism expert group, managers from Ardabil University of Medical Sciences, heads of educational-treatment hospitals, tourism providers, and various stakeholders including representatives from private and public health providers and government bodies.

Data collection tool and technique

Data were collected through semistructured individual interviews and focus group discussions using the protocol of Krueger and Casey. The principle of saturation was used for data gathering and was reached when no new themes or relevant information emerged.^[23] The interviews took place at the managers' preferred locations and times, lasting approximately 35–67 minutes. Both individual interviews and group discussions were held in the managers' room. Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously to investigate the obstacles to health tourism in Ardabil province. Researchers used a six-stage thematic analysis framework to analyze the data. All interviews were transcribed and reviewed to obtain a general meaning view. The analysis began by identifying units of meaning extracted from the statements. The units were extracted in the form of open codes and were divided into homogeneous categories. The categories were then combined to form themes. The researchers used MAXQDA software to manage the textual data. Although more than 20 themes were extracted, the explorations were organized into 12 main themes. In cases of discrepancies or inconsistencies, the researchers discussed with the interviewees. Our strategies to ensure trustworthiness were findings by implementing methods from authors like Guba and Lincoln. Credibility was established through member checks and revisions of interviews using WhatsApp. Maximum variation sampling was used to select participants from various organizations and systems, adjusting for the diversity of characteristics.^[24-31] The research environment included provincial administrations, health tourism agencies, police managers, cultural heritage organizations, travel agencies, and radio and television managers.

Ethical consideration

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Ardabil University of Medical Sciences (IR.ARUMS.REC.1398.252). An informed consent form was obtained from all the participants before the interviews.

Results

Based on the information presented in Table 1 [Appendix], the age range of the participants in the study varied from 28 to 56 years. Additionally, the participants had a minimum of 3 years of work experience and held at least a bachelor's degree.

According to the research findings, over 200 initial codes were discovered, leading to the extraction of 80 conceptual labels or preliminary codes for broader concepts after multiple revisions to achieve conceptual density. Finally, we derived seven themes from the participants' responses:

1. **Inadequate infrastructure for medical tourism**
2. **Ineffective governmental policies, regulations, and tariffs**
3. **Inadequate or subpar management practices**
4. **Inefficient healthcare professionals involved in health tourism**
5. **Lack of involvement of travel agencies in promoting health tourism**
6. **Absence of global information and limited involvement of local and national mass media**
7. **Presence of unregulated and nonspecialized brokers**

Discussion

The study identified barriers to health tourism through an analysis of seven themes. Reviews showed mixed opinions, with cultural and law enforcement managers expressing negativity and medical professionals and tourism agencies expressing positivity [Table 2]. Ardabil, an Iranian province with a history of 5000 years, was established in 1993 and is located in the northwest of Iran. Known for its hot water and mineral springs, Ardabil is a popular destination for health tourism. The region was once a part of East Azerbaijan province and is home to valuable natural resources.^[10] The expansion of urban life and industrial development of cities, alongside lifestyle changes, have led to an increase in physical and mental illnesses.^[11] Tourism and travel to Ardabil have been popular among human beings since ancient times. In these travels, tourists have explored the natural beauty and cultural richness of the region.^[12] The promotion of health tourism can lead to economic development, job opportunities, and poverty reduction while also contributing to national identity and mental well-being.^[13] Ardabil province is renowned for its cultural and historical assets, but its tourism potential is underutilized. The region offers natural wonders like the Sarein complex and mineral springs as well as historical sites. However, the lack of adequate medical facilities discourages tourists and locals. The province holds great potential for investment in the tourism industry, particularly in the field of water and hydrotherapy (Theme 1). Governments collaborate with various sectors to create policies, including those related to health and tourism. Managers must identify obstacles, gain societal acceptance, and develop strategies for policy

implementation. Transparency and sustainability are sometimes lacking in policies, leading to high costs for foreign patients. The chamber of commerce can help advance health tourism.^[32] Theme 2 evaluation reveals that Ardabil's lack of clear and continuous policy, approval of appropriate policies, and infrastructure preparation are the main issues hindering the provision of various health services at different costs, transforming Ardabil into a tourism zone. Updating policies, removing the legal vacuum of advertising doctors in the media, promoting experienced doctors, and interdepartmental cooperation are crucial for successful policy-making and regulation, monitoring health tourism centers, and facilitating licensing for tourism companies.

Organizations require management as an inescapable necessity to move toward construction and perfection. The manager's tools are man, work, and goal. Human resources are the key to success for managers in organizational environments. Organizations serve individual and group interests but depend on the efforts of their human resources to survive and achieve goals. Employee willingness to do useful and better work is crucial for organizational success.^[6] Organization is a systematic process of interpersonal relationships aimed at achieving certain goals. It involves individuals who are related to each other through established reciprocal relations that can be systematized through regulations and directives. Personal goals affect individual performance, and mutual relations and common goals enable organizations to pursue common goals while achieving individual ones. The organizational structure reflects these interrelationships, including determining roles, interpersonal relationships, activities, hierarchy of goals, and other characteristics. Health tourism lacks a proper structure, which may be why it is not well developed in the province. The participants' objections to policy-making, management, planning, monitoring, cross-sectoral cooperation, and activity evaluation reveal the poor management of the health tourism organization in Ardabil province. The health tourism management is led by only one person, which goes against the theories of scientific management. Managers should not only control and guide employees' behavior but also manage and lead their motivation, efficiency, productivity, and satisfaction in the workplace. Ultimately, motivation determines the behavior of people in the organization.^[33-35]

Theme 3 of the research focuses on issues hindering the development of health tourism in Ardabil province. The absence of a specialized tourism company, knowledge gap among managers, and insufficient cooperation between sectors are among the concerns raised by managers. Coordination among institutions and agencies is crucial, but the lack of a dedicated overseer responsible for tourism offices, marketing, attracting health patients, and

addressing grievances is a hindrance. Streamlining patient admission procedures, establishing resource centers, and fostering collaboration are key steps for progress. The engagement of stakeholders and allocation of resources are also essential. Ardabil province has health spas for tourists but requires essential facilities and promotion of healing attractions to realize its potential for revenue and employment opportunities. The workforce is crucial to the success and improvement of organizations. Employees who are loyal, share the organization's values, and go beyond their assigned duties are essential for effectiveness. Unfortunately, the field of health employs a wide range of personnel, some without employment status, whose performance and behavior have been subject to discussion and challenge in various research studies. Organizational commitment and responsibility are the main factors of efficiency and effectiveness for employees.^[36] The participating managers in a study had different interpretations of the issue (Theme 4), but it was concluded that the Azeri people in Ardabil trust Iranian doctors and medicines, making it crucial to develop tourism in partnership with them. However, Ardabil province does not benefit much from tourism despite its proximity to Azerbaijan. A lack of experienced doctors and modern hospital equipment make Azeri patients prefer going to Tabriz. Implementing proper mechanisms and rules, conducting training programs for medical staff and tourism leaders, and establishing cooperation with countries offering health tourism programs are all important steps to take in the province.

Tourism originates from the Latin word "Tourns", meaning to travel back and forth between origin and destination. It involves any travel where a person leaves work or life and can include business related to attracting and entertaining tourists. The World Tourism Organization defines tourism as a set of activities where a person travels to a place other than their normal residence and stays there for at least 1 night and at most 1 year for leisure purposes. Organized tourism is an important industry worldwide. Tourists are usually attracted to the climate, culture, or nature of their destination.^[37-39]

Ardabil has a rich history due to its mineral and hot springs, but its health-oriented tourism industry is currently underdeveloped. The lack of proactive health tourism companies and competent leaders is evident despite the province's potential for utilizing its natural resources for medical purposes. These findings were presented in "Theme 5".

Advertising is a process that aims to influence people's beliefs and actions regarding goods and services. Planning plays a crucial role in advertising, requiring an objective understanding of customer behavior and market-related components. The success of advertising depends on attention, perception, and acceptance. Various techniques

and tools, including communication, writing, speaking, and visual, are used in advertising. These techniques include two-line publication, specialized archive, brochure publishing, leaflets, and press response, among others. Advertising can improve the development of health tourism in a province if implemented comprehensively.^[40,41] The field of health tourism advertising in Ardabil province has been neglected, with no established agencies or hubs for attracting health tourists. To overcome this hindrance, digital marketing strategies should be utilized, and tourism companies should be collaborated with to promote hot springs and accommodation facilities (Theme 6).

Brokerage refers to a service business that mediates between buyers and sellers and finds a party to the transaction. Brokers and intermediaries are important in value and value creation. In the field of strategic and marketing management, these terms are frequently used.^[42] Illegal brokers often exist in customs due to the lack of proper organization in tourism at the country's entry points^[43]. Ardabil's health tourism sector has great potential but has been hindered by ineffective management, exploitation by intermediaries, and successful medical tourism in Tabriz. This has resulted in patients facing exorbitant expenses and not receiving desired tourism and medical services. Such a situation can be a significant obstacle to the development of tourism in the region. In "Theme 7", it was found that brokers proficient in language on both sides of the border are easily diverted from their main path, hindering their return for treatment in this province and leading to a decrease in tourism growth, particularly in the health sector. Furthermore, mafia agents manipulate patients for profit by controlling their movements and medical procedures, resulting in cases of deception and reluctance among authorities to accept certain individuals.

<H2>Limitations and recommendation

In a recent study, several managers, experts, and officials refused to be interviewed, hindering the researcher's ability to fully explore the challenges facing health tourism in Iran's Ardabil province. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the study, the perspectives of Azeri tourists were not able to be captured.

It is recommended to study Azari health tourists in the first stage of the next studies. In addition, forms should be designed and based on that, health and medical tourism centers, travel agencies, and communication and language abilities of drivers and medical center staff should be studied. Finally, appropriate tariffs for foreign health tourists are approved by provincial managers and information is provided through the Internet, virtual space, and satellite programs.

Conclusion

These results showed that from the perspective of managers, there are obstacles to health tourism in the province, and this has led to a lack of more efficient health tourism and human, economic, and social damage to the country and people. Considering the importance and position of prosperity and development of health tourism, more and more accurate understanding of policy makers, managers, health system employees, tourism companies, and people of health tourism barriers in the community for better planning and effective interventions to completely remove barriers to perception and reducing the damage to these barriers seems necessary.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Ardabil University of Medical Sciences (IR.ARUMS.REC.1398.252). Informed consent form was obtained from all the participants before the interviews.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Appendics

Table 1: Participants' demographic information		
Variables		Frequency
Age (year)	28-30	5 (26.5%)
	31-40	6 (31.5%)
	41-50	6 (31.5%)
	51-56	2 (10.5%)
Gender	Female	5 (26.5%)
	Male	14 (73.5%)
Marital status	Single	3 (15.8%)
	Married	16 (84.2%)
Education level	Bachelor	4 (21.0%)
	Master	5 (26.5%)
	Ph.D	10 (52.5%)
Job title	Physician	3 (15.7%)
	Environmental health engineering	1 (5.3%)
	Occupational health engineering	1 (5.3%)
	Midwife	1 (5.3%)
	Health education trainer	2 (10.5%)
	Nurse	2 (10.5%)
	Clinical Psychologist	2 (10.5%)
	Sociologist	1 (5.3%)
	Scientist	3 (15.8%)
	Director of education and healthcare services	4 (21.1%)
Work experiences	3-10	4 (21.1%)
	11-20	10 (52.5%)
	21-29	5 (26.4%)

Table 2: Participants' highlighted quotations	
Themes	Highlighted quotations
1. Inadequate infrastructure for medical tourism	<i>"We always talk about the cultural and historical assets of Ardabil province in domestic and foreign circles and forums. Regardless of what specialty we have and in what group are we talking about, Ardabil province is one of the provinces that has very high tourism capacities. Although there are dozens of pictures, designs and books of the province's attractions, but the tourist does not come to our province as much as it should and its potentials is not used optimally". (Participant 1)</i>
	<i>"Ardabil region in terms of tourism is really an example of four seasons in one place. It is attractive for domestic and foreign tourists, our hospitality share of tourism income is low and insignificant, and Ardabil is extremely suitable for investment in the field of tourism". (Participant 2)</i>
	<i>"Look! in every corner of Ardabil province, there is a natural and divine gift that is very effective in attracting tourism, including the complex of Sarein, Sardabeh, Nir, Khalkhal, hot and cold mineral springs in Meshkinshahr including Moyel, Shabel, Qotorsui, Fandoqlou Forest region, the nature of Heyran pass, Shorabil, Neor and Sola lakes, etc." (Participant 3)</i>

	<p>"In Ardabil province, we have two types of tourism facilities: natural and historical places and medical centers. Ardabil province does not have the necessary medical ability so that even some patients in Ardabil go to Tabriz and Tehran for treatment, and this is not attractive for tourists, but water and hydrotherapy with different effects and healing is a potential source" (Participant 4)</p>	
2. Ineffective governmental policies, regulations, and tariffs	<p>"Our main problem is the lack of clear and continuous policy, approval of appropriate policies and preparation of infrastructure. Managers can come up with updated policies and transparent, to offer many health services at a different cost from other parts of the world, and to turn Ardabil into a tourism zone" (Participant 1)</p>	
	<p>"We have been facing the legal vacuum of advertising doctors in the media for years, and this is a wrong policy, while in my opinion, in order to develop medical tourism, this obstacle should be removed and experienced doctors should be advertised in the mass media". (Participant 7)</p>	
	<p>"Cooperation of executive, law enforcement or police and security agencies with the department of health tourism in the Ministry of Health for policy-making, setting policies, preparing laws and regulations and monitoring health tourism centers and facilitating the licensing of tourism companies is essential".(Participant 7)</p>	
3. Inadequate or subpar management practices	<p>"Numerous institutions in our country are in charge or involved in the tourism and health tourism industry, some of whose tasks are completely parallel to each other, so there should be centralized management and adequate coordination between institutions and agencies" (Participant 6).</p>	
	<p>"Health tourism in the province has no dedicated trustee to set up tourism offices, plan to advertise and attract health patients and tourists, evaluate the health tourism situation in the province and handle possible complaints in this field, and this can be one of the main obstacles to health tourism development." (Participant 10).</p>	
	<p>"We must first determine the status of those who are influential in the health tourism industry: Department of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, travel and tourism companies and drivers, insurance companies, the governor's office, the municipality, security and law enforcement forces, medical universities, owners of natural or modern spas and hot springs, etc., from whom to get a license and where to give a license and where to be responsible for providing facilities, and what people with what characteristics and with what capabilities, in what fields should work" (Participant 13)</p>	
	<p>"There is the presence of managers and leaders who are not specialized and unfamiliar with tourism and narrow-mindedness and anti-development ideas in the province. Infrastructure and planning are very weak and no major work is being done in this area" (Participant 7).</p>	
	<p>"In my opinion, neither the people nor the managers still have a good knowledge of health tourism and its difference with travel, and when there is no knowledge and awareness, one should not expect a dream, so the first step should be to raise public awareness. And managers should be aware of the status and value of tourism, and in that case, we can work on ways to develop health tourism, in our country, tourism has not been institutionalized yet, let alone the development of health tourism" (Participant 11).</p>	
	<p>Managers need to change their view of the health tourism industry and believe that the development of health tourism and medical tourism can generate significant revenue for the province" (Participant 12).</p>	
	<p>"In general, health tourism is not a useless job, it also creates a lot of jobs, but it depends on the kind of view and managerial action, it should be serious, regular, coherent and a kind that works continuously and involves different sectors, even the taxi unit need" (Participant 8)</p>	
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	<p>Lack of planning in this area is a major problem. The patient admission process, especially from Azerbaijan, can be much better than the current situation. A representative office can be set up at the source. General practitioners can file a preliminary case and then refer patients to treatment centers. Specialized in the provincial center of the body referral" (Participant 9).</p>	
	<p>"For development in health tourism all institutions should be coordinated, there should be a long-term vision and attitude, infrastructure should be provided, practical measures should be taken to attract investors, relations with neighboring countries should be strengthened. Most importantly, strengthen the culture of acceptance and well-being of tourists in the community" (Participant 10).</p>	
	<p>"In the realm of health tourism, aside from the expertise of specialists and medical facilities, indulging in hot springs and mineral water has consistently remained a key motivation for travelers. Ardabil province boasts a variety of contemporary and traditional spas that cater to health tourists seeking therapeutic experiences. To enhance healing tourism, it is imperative to ensure the provision of essential amenities in this sector, including the establishment of private enterprises and fostering inter-sectoral collaboration. For instance, post-treatment, patients can be directed from accommodation centers to modern and traditional spas located in nearby and distant cities like Sarein, Nir, Kowsar, Meshkinshahr, and Abish Ahmad. Furthermore, promoting the natural and cultural-historical attractions of Ardabil, such as the Sheikh Safi-ud-Din Ardabili complex, is crucial. Achieving this goal necessitates the involvement of various stakeholders and resources." (Participant 12)</p>	
	4. Inefficient healthcare professionals involved in health tourism	<p>"One point I need to emphasize is that the Azeri people still believe in Iranian doctors and medicines and the development of tourism with them is valuable and especially 90-80% of their diseases in Ardabil can be covered and treated" (Participant 10).</p>
		<p>"The presence of experienced medical staff in the province is one of the important factors that make the Azeri people in this province choose for treatment, so attracting famous specialists, organizing the admission system and guiding foreign patients can greatly help the development of the region" (Participant 15)</p>

	<p>"I think that none of the patients who come to this province for treatment return to their country with satisfaction. Ardabil province, despite being a neighbor of Azerbaijan, does not benefit much from the tourism industry, while Azeri patients do not have experienced doctors and modern hospital equipment, so travels to this province, but mainly go to Tabriz. Of course, I would also like to say that according to what has been heard, competent doctors have recently arrived in Ardabil, but these are not well introduced either. Also, we must strengthen the culture of respect for patients, the value of high self-esteem and ethics in physicians and the correct mechanisms and rules must be drawn up and approved, and clinics and physicians will be fined if they violate them" (Participant 9)</p> <p>"In order to improve the tourism situation, necessary courses and trainings such as communication skills with tourists, health and medical ethics should be held for medical staff and tourism leaders, and certificates should be issued for activists in this field. Also, associate and bachelor training programs and even higher levels. Launched health tourism with the cooperation of the countries that have this program and the field of study in the province" (Participant 11)</p>
5. Lack of involvement of travel agencies in promoting health tourism	<p>"As far as I know, we do not have a health-oriented tourism company in Ardabil. Lack of tourism service offices with health tourism licenses in this province is one of the obstacles"(Participant 1. ("According to the regulations, only medical centers that have received the necessary permits from the ministry of health are allowed to sign contracts with companies and tourism offices licensed in the field of health tourism, but in this regard, we do not have active tourism offices" (Participant 8)</p> <p>"I think there is a good potential in the province for medical use of spas, mineral waters, Salt Lake, medical sludge (natural mud or Qara Palchikh), herbal baths, sun and climate due to their special nature, but health tourism companies are not active in this field and we do not have strong tourism leaders." (Participant 12).</p>
6. Absence of global information and limited involvement of local and national mass media	<p>"In my opinion, perhaps the lack of agencies and fixed bases for attracting health tourists from Ardabil province in large cities and capitals of neighboring countries to enable patients to travel to Ardabil is one of the obstacles" (Participant 5)</p> <p>"It is not clear how much the tourists of the neighboring countries are familiar with the hot springs and healing mineral waters and their advanced accommodation facilities in Ardabil province, and how much they are interested in using these natural gifts? In this regard, the use of new methods of business and digital marketing with young people familiar with startups can be helpful" (Participant 7)</p> <p>"Tourism companies should be established and attract tourists to the province's healing tourism attractions with extensive advertisements from all over the country and even neighboring countries" (Participant 11)</p>
7. Presence of unregulated and nonspecialized brokers	<p>"Sometimes, brokers are lurking on both sides of the border, and given that they are well acquainted with their language, they are easily dominated and they are diverted from the main path. This situation deters them from returning to this province for treatment and leads them to other countries, which I think is a major obstacle to the development of tourism, especially health tourism" (Participant 5).</p> <p>"Mafia agents entered, for example, they wanted to take patients to Tabriz or even wanted to bring travelers to Ardabil themselves. Because this had several benefits for them: bringing patients, changing patients and making a profit, taking them to the laboratory and receiving commissions and so" (Participant 10).</p> <p>"We also had a series of evils and misdeeds in Azerbaijan. For example, we had a person named He was good in the beginning, later he found a shift in Tabriz, and he was upset. Later, he came to us and we did not accept it anymore" (Participant 10).</p>