





# NORTHERN STAR

FINLAND IS A NEW  
INTERNATIONAL  
MEDICAL TOURISM  
DESTINATION

AS THE RANGE OF HEALTHCARE SERVICES CATERING TO FOREIGN PATIENTS INCREASES, CLIENTELE FROM RUSSIA AND OTHER COUNTRIES ARE TRAVELLING TO FINLAND FOR SPECIALISED TREATMENTS SUCH AS CANCER CARE.

TEXT BY KATJA PANTZAR ; ILLUSTRATIONS BY KASPER STRÖMMAN / NAPA ILLUSTRATIONS

**W**hen British celebrity footballer David Beckham flew to Turku in 2010 for ankle surgery on a ruptured Achilles tendon, it provided a neat example of Finnish medical know-how worth travelling for: the successful surgery was performed by Dr Sakari Orava, a renowned expert in orthopaedic medicine.

Beckham's case is not an isolated one, as growing numbers of foreigners – many of whom are Russians – visit Finland for highly specialised services ranging from cancer care to fertility treatments and laser surgery.

Though the market is still in its infancy – health-care travel from Russia accounted for 15 million euros in 2011 – the opportunities for growth are potentially big, says FinnMedi, a health-care business consultancy and development firm.

#### A WORLD LEADER IN RADIATION THERAPY

One of FinnMedi's partners is private cancer care hospital Docrates, which has attracted patients from 30 different countries including the Nordics, Africa, South America, Canada, the US, and Australia.

"Russians were the biggest group of foreigners that we treated last year," says **Dr Timo Joensuu**, the Helsinki-based hospital's clinical director and a specialist in medical oncology and radiotherapy.

Approximately 14 per cent of Docrates's 2011 revenue of nine million euros came from foreign patients. Last year they treated 15,000 patients, 130 patients were from Russia.

Docrates has also received patients who intended to travel to Germany or Israel – traditional cancer care destinations. "They have heard and understood that we have treatments that are not available anywhere else," says Joensuu.

Those treatments use state of the art equipment in an ultra-modern facility that opened in 2009, and a unique patient-centred approach, where the needs of the end user – the patient – are the foundation of the

entire care concept. This service design approach earned Docrates World Design Capital Helsinki 2012 partner status.

#### HOSPITAL HOTEL

Stepping into the lobby of Docrates Cancer Center is like entering a Nordic hotel lobby. Daylight streams in through large windows that open out onto a view of the Baltic Sea. Colourful chairs in red, orange and blue are tastefully arranged around a coffee table. On the fifth floor, there's a comfortable 14-bed patient hotel for those who come for treatment from further away.

Joensuu, the visionary behind Docrates, founded in concept in 2006 with a group of like-minded individuals including pioneering physicists Pekka Aalto and Harri Puurunen.

"We started by bringing together all of the different professional groups involved in cancer care to think about how this should be done – if we were patients ourselves, what kind of place and care would we want?" asks Joensuu, a soft-spoken and passionate man.

The answer was fast diagnosis and a treatment path utilising all the newest advances in cancer care technology and medicine delivered in a pleasant, caring environment with a team of top professionals who are accessible at every stage of the treatment process.

#### FAST TRACK

"Our service promise is that within a day or two we organise the initial specialist appointment and within a week we're able to draw up a plan of care," says Joensuu. "If the patient already has a diagnosis, we can even start treatment on the same day."

Docrates (a hybrid of "doctor" and "Socrates") was founded on the belief that cancer care could be carried out in a different way. Although cancer is the leading cause of death worldwide according to the World Health Organization, traditional cancer care models can be slow and out-dated.

THE  
OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR GROWTH  
ARE HUGE.

“We believe in a good public health care system and on the whole it works well – like a fine motorway that occasionally gets congested. That’s where we can offer additional capacity,” says Joensuu, whose team works very closely with the public healthcare system. “There’s not just one single way to treat cancer. In the private sector, we are able to tailor treatments to a larger extent.”

To illustrate his point, he refers to the PET, or positron emission tomography, a nuclear medicine imaging technique that produces an accurate three-dimensional image of a process in the body such as active cancer cells. “We have the Rolls Royce of molecular imaging, the PET machine,” says Joensuu. “Its power is not in the camera but in the radioactive tracers that are produced with a cyclotron – this makes us globally a totally unique hospital, as there are only a handful of hospitals in the world where this machine is available in-house.”

Docrates was the first in Finland to adopt RapidArc radiotherapy technology and the first in Scandinavia in the private sector. It was also the first unit in Finland to provide HDR-brachytherapy (internal radiotherapy) for prostate cancer.

#### WOMEN'S HEALTH

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women. Joensuu recommends magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) for every woman before breast cancer surgery, which is not standard procedure. Typically, surgery is based on mammography, ultrasound, and needle biopsy findings.

“We’ve made additional discoveries in up one third of women’s breasts during MRIs,” says Joensuu. “Also, surprisingly during an MRI something may be found in the other breast – a serious breast cancer that wasn’t noticed in the ultrasound,” he says, adding that it would be fatal if the additional findings had remained undetected.

“There may also be something in the same breast that is the beginning of a serious growth,” he says. “Then we go to the PET (positron emission tomography), and we can see the active cancer cells.”

**Kirsi Komi**, who is Docrates’ chairman of the board, initially came to the center as a patient. Her story was recently profiled on the cover of *Talouselämä*, one of Finland’s leading business magazines.

In 2010, at the age of 46, Komi had recently resigned as director of legal affairs for Nokia Siemens Networks with the intent of taking some time out when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

When Komi received her diagnosis, she was told that she would be informed in three or four weeks time by letter of the next steps for treatment in the public sector. Feeling as though she’d been handed a death sentence, she turned to friends, and one of them told her about a new, private cancer center. She called the Docrates switchboard at 4 pm, and an hour later she was talking directly with a doctor. “I started to feel hope and that my life might not be over yet,” she says.

Her new lease on life also brought a new career with Docrates.



## THE FINNISH EDGE

Russian medical tourists are reportedly attracted to Finland because of the high quality of medical and health services, their speed and efficiency, and competitive prices. Finland is also a safe country, and for Russians it’s geographically close, so long travel times are unnecessary. And very important, many clinics and hospitals have Russian-speaking staff.

FinnMedi, a health-care business consultancy and development firm, has conducted health tourism market research in Russia. According to their findings, more than 50 per cent of Russians needing healthcare services are interested in going abroad. While Germany is the most enticing and best-known medical tourism destination for them, Finland is not quite as well known yet –there are many niches in the Russian market that Finland can fill. For example, according to the survey, fertility treatment and perinatal care in Russia are not meeting customer demand.

A new healthcare portal in Russian (and English) provides a centralised service with detailed information on healthcare services, private and public, with partner clinics and hospitals including Docrates and Coxa.

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## MEN'S HEALTH

Prostate cancer is the most common form for men around the world. But the traditional way of testing for it is inaccurate.

"We started from the beginning to develop an imaging process that is much more accurate and allows us to see into the prostate, even if there are no symptoms," says Joensuu.

He recommends that men start going for annual PSA (prostate-specific antigen) tests at age 50. If the PSA level starts to rise, then cancer is forming and it's possible to find it and treat it – with few side effects and cost effectively.

He says that surgery is not always the best option because some cancer cells can remain – traditional systems of imaging don't reveal active cancer cells and traditional treatments can adversely affect the area and quality of life.

## FOREFRONT OF RESEARCH

Docrates is also a pioneer in gene therapy. About 300 patients have been treated in the revolutionary oncolytic virus program under the direction of research professor Akseli Hemminki.

Owing to its highly qualified professional know-how and status as a research centre, the hospital also treats very rare forms of cancer. "We have people coming to us with very difficult cases such as thymus cancer, which is so rare that some cancer doctors have never encountered it," says Joensuu. "We also treat lymphoma, leukaemia, the kinds of cancers that a cancer doctor doesn't necessarily treat at a cancer clinic or university hospital as we have haematolo-

gists, paediatricians, endocrinologists, internists, radiologists, physicists, and neurologists – all the doctors for all the areas of specialism of cancer."

The challenge for Joensuu and his team, he says, is to retain their dynamism as the hospital grows, stay at the top their field, and embrace the world as it comes to them for cancer care.

## HIPS, EGGS AND OTHER THINGS

According to the *International Medical Travel Journal* (IMTJ), which bills itself as the world's leading travel journal for the medical travel sector, Finland's reputation as a medical tourism destination is growing.

At Helsinki's Felicitas fertility clinic one out of ten clients comes from abroad. In Norway, for example, the laws on donor egg treatments are stricter than in Finland.

Suomen Terveystalo (Finland's Health House), Finland's largest private clinic and hospital chain, receives hundreds of foreign clients every year for treatments such as varicose vein treatment and laser surgery.

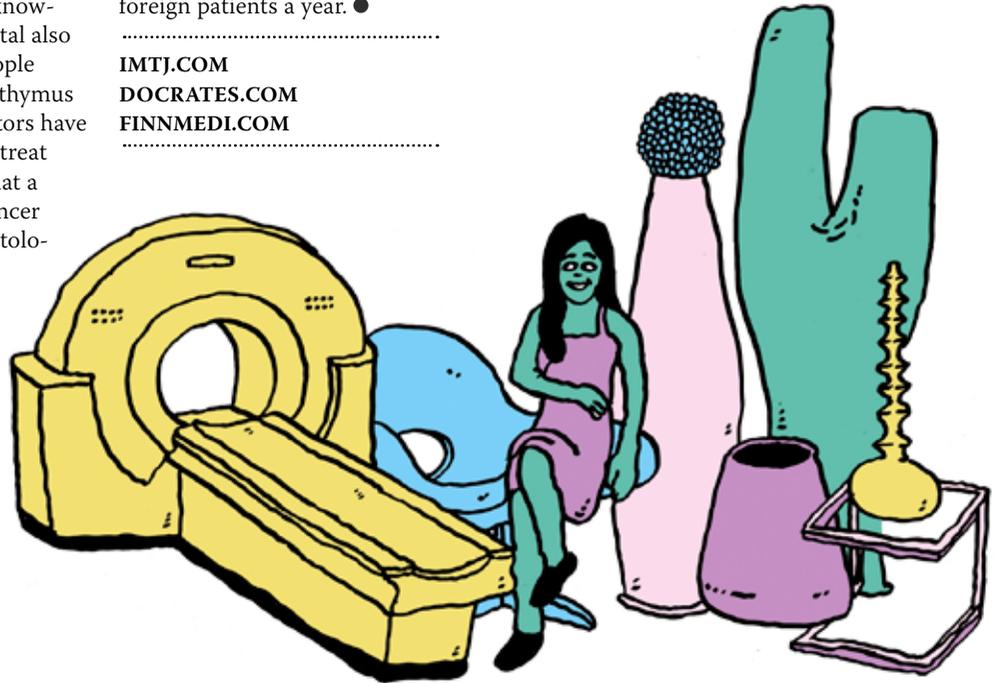
Public hospitals including Coxa, which specialises in joint replacement in Tampere, receives close to 100 foreign patients a year. ●

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