

## SPA POLITICS

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In the United States of America the origins of spas are found in the personal interest of those who are looking for health and beauty. The desire for pampering, consultation on nutrition and fitness was later added in search of stress-relief, mental training and consultation on a connection of body, soul and spirit. The spa thus reflected **a place of individual personal policy.**

Only recently professional medical interest increases concerning spa treatments and spa industry. This development will continue. The more evolved spa environment and spa treatments become the more benefits can be expected for health and thus the bigger the interest of medical science and business will be.

The ideal and reality of spa as a place where the Ego is reconnected to its roots, the body and thus nature in an attractive environment inspires the medical field, which is opening itself to a holistic approach. The first step in this development of medicine is the integration of different worlds within the medical frame itself, which still is centered around the what we call in Germany "School Medicine". Andrew Weil strongly speaks for the trend to **Integrative Medicine** which appear to becoming into the mainstream in some years.

The consumers in fact have revolutionized the medical market by demanding complementary medical treatments. Since this was found and published in the early Nineties in the Eisenberg Study<sup>1)</sup> Health Insurances and the Medical Science and Profession have gradually opened up to this demand. The research group found - and that was in 1990 - that people of the United States spent about the same amount for unconventional therapy as for all hospitalizations out of their own pocket, and that the number of visits to providers of unconventional therapy in the US was greater than the number of visits to all primary care medical doctors nationwide.

And shortly there will be a complete issue of The American Journal of Medicine on the topic of complementary medicine including an update of the Eisenberg-Study. So, the consumers needs and choices indeed are vital for future developments.

We cannot expect our citizens to lead a healthy lifestyle without offering education on how to do it. A study about the attitudes of German workers towards their health shows that only a minority of them has a positive attitude towards their own health and even fewer practice active health prevention.<sup>2)</sup> Because of the exploding medical expenses governments worldwide are challenged by the need to invest in prevention and rehabilitation instead of just managing diseases if they want to cut expenses and satisfy the needs of the population.

Numerous studies worldwide show that in long terms investing in prevention and rehabilitation is definitely less expensive for national economy than not investing in it. The Center for Research in Disease Prevention, Stanford University collected and commented on US-studies in prevention since 1983 and finds that preventative measurements are cost effective in their vast majority.<sup>3)</sup> Another source focussing on the topic of cost-effectiveness of spa therapies was financed by the International Spa and Fitness Association, directed by Mary Tabacchi and published in two volumes 1996 and 1997. Again, literature on research and results given are collected and evaluated.<sup>4)</sup>

Since 1986 the effects of rehabilitation are collected by the German National Pension Insurance. Statistics prove that more than two third of the rehabilitation investments pay back, because they keep the employees in their jobs for at least five more years<sup>5)</sup>. The motto "Favor rehabilitation over pension" which is a common agreement in German politics, saves money. A research for the year 1989 found the number of about 2,3 Billion Deutschmarks.<sup>6)</sup>



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How does the rehabilitation system in Germany work? If a medical doctor finds that the patient is threatened by chronic disease he or she can prescribe a rehabilitation treatment, either in the town where the patient lives or stationary in a rehabilitation clinic. In the stationary treatment the patient remains for three weeks. While the disease is treated the patients are also trained how to keep healthy.

Although the science of rehabilitation is very evolved in Germany covering all fields of chronic diseases<sup>7)</sup> the German Parliament decided end of 1996 to cut expenses in this field. In the same year, prevention was eliminated in the law, which meant that the health insurance companies stopped all the expenses for prevention. Tens of thousands of skilled health professionals lost their jobs, big investments in both, prevention and rehabilitation, are forever destroyed and many towns which are homes of spas and rehabilitation were pushed in poverty.

How could that happen? In a time of decreasing resources expenses had to be cut. The pressure groups of the pharmaceutical industry, the hospitals and the organizations of the Medical Doctors were defending their share and the weakest, least organized group had lost. This is tragic, since it went against all good political, economic and social reason. So, a business which is created by politics can also easily be destroyed by politics.

In the period of consolidation after the Second World War West Germany, but also the socialist countries behind the Iron Curtain developed specific spa programs for their citizens, based on the spa traditions of the 19th and early 20th century. These programs were financed by the health insurance companies and the pension funds and had an economic background: the countries needed their workforce and its health desperately to build up a new economy. Labor was precious. The pension-funds calculated that rather than loosing the diseased individual into the group of the pensioners and having to pay him or her money on a monthly base without working, one

should keep him or her in the job by rehabilitation and the employer would still pay this person - and not the pension fund.

The health insurance company calculated that especially with people suffering of chronic diseases - now at least 10 % of the population with numbers growing - it was worth treating and training them away from their every day environment which often plays a manifesting role in the chronic disease. Instead, one would train the chronic ill patients in a different environment to cope with their disease and thus decrease the long term medical costs. These concepts worked. So, in central and eastern Europe the spa played an important role in **public health policy**.

## OUTLOOK

The old spa-system of Europe which is focused around health and the new idea of spa in the United States which has its origins in the idea of beauty will integrate and increasingly center around concepts where **health and beauty together are the base of personal success**. In terms of market trends the US-Spa-market will deepen its appreciation of the social welfare and medical tradition whereas the European markets, especially the formerly medical oriented ones, will include more aspects of marketing, sales, public relations and individual health and beauty.

The same integration of two seemingly contradictory systems is expected to occur in the field of health policy. On the one hand, the individual responsibility for personal health and disease grows, on the other hand, the need for nationally and internationally coordinated and regulated health policy increases. The field of **Public Health** has become an accepted and integral part of medical research, science, education and policy.<sup>8)</sup> The strong vote for a socialist respective socialdemocrat policy in Western Europe reflects this demand of the majority for integrating and regulating states policy, which only can be successful by at the same time educating the individual citizen towards self-management and personal responsibility.

Health Care is a number one business worldwide. The rapidly increasing expenses in this field and the political need for growing personal responsibility highlight the future role of spas. It is central, not only educating the public in dealing with health and gaining a holistic approach, but also creating the supportive environment which will influence good health practices.

The World Health Organization defines **optimal health** as a balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual health. Thus health is more than just the health of the body. Health promotion seeks to help people in finding their optimal state of health by

- enhancing awareness
- changing behavior
- creating environments that support good health practices.

“Of the three, **supportive environments** will probably have the greatest impact in producing lasting change.”<sup>9)</sup> Spa can play a leading role in this process of building a **healthy society**. It has a specific role as a place of health and happiness.

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- 9) American Journal of Health Promotion, 1989, 3, 3, 5

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Internet sources for more information about alternative medicine, selected by the Journal of the American Medical Association:

- ▶ The University of Texas Center for Alternative Medicine research,  
<http://www.sph.uth.tmc.edu/utcam/default.htm>
- ▶ Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine,  
<http://www-camra.ucdavis.edu>
- ▶ Phytochemical and Ethnobotanical Databases, for information on herbal therapies,  
<http://www.ars-grin.gov/duke>
- ▶ Spa Management Journal,  
<http://www.spamanagement.com>
- ▶ National Institutes of Health Office of Alternative Medicine,  
<http://www.altmed.od.nih.gov>
- ▶ Quackwatch, maintained by a group that watches for health fraud,  
<http://www.quackwatch.com>
- ▶ Food and Drug Administration Guide to Choosing Medical Treatments,  
<http://www.fda.gov/oashi/aids/fdaguide.html>
- ▶ Fact Sheets on Alternative Medicine,  
<http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/rosenthal/factsheets.html>