

*“Innovative health solutions
for thermal spa regions”*

Newsletter 6

In this edition of the Newsletter:

- **STUDY: Spa therapy & COVID-19 on the European market**
- International Congress in Thermal Tourism in Ourense (ES)

STUDY | SPA THERAPY & COVID-19 ON THE EUROPEAN MARKET

Within the framework of the new financing (provided under the fifth call of Interreg Europe), [Thermauvergne Association](#) and its InnovaSPA partners has launched an evaluation of the existing good practices "COVID & Spa Therapy" on the European market. Thermauvergne Association has launched a consultation with several European experts in December 2021 and the European association [ESPA](#), which has European expertise on the subject, won the contract. By "good practices" we mean "thermal care programmes" developed by the thermal spas on the European market in response to the COVID health crisis in order to help with the management and rehabilitation of post COVID patients.

This study has been carried out from 1st February 2022 to 31st August 2022 in 4 phases:

Phase 1: review of available data, studies and analyses

Phase 2: qualitative survey of the actors of European thermalism

- Part 1: survey with the thermal actors of a part of the European territory

- Part 2: direct interviews with a selection of European thermal actors to validate the conclusions

of part 1 and to exchange around short- and medium-term adaptation actions.

Phase 3: analysis of the results and recommendations

Phase 4: synthesis of the data collected and the recommendations made.

This group was responsible for monitoring the work of the study, responding to requests from the selected service provider and validating the proposals and deliverables of each phase.

The results of this work aim to better position European spa therapy in the rehabilitation of post-COVID patients and in the treatment of long COVID.

A steering committee composed of the following stakeholders steered the different phases of the implementation of the study:

- Thermauvergne Association (France) as coordinator,
- European Spas Association (ESPA) as service provider,
- National Council of Thermal Spa Providers (France),
- University of Lorraine (France),
- Inter-university Institute of Thermal Medicine of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (France),
- University of Porto (Portugal),
- University of Debrecen (Hungary),
- Health Tourism Cluster (Latvia).

Objectives: To better understand the post-COVID care programmes offered by thermal spa operators in Europe in order to improve the thermal programmes and the management of patients in long COVID.

The results of this work aim to better position European spa therapy in the rehabilitation of post-COVID patients and in the treatment of long COVID.

[Click here for more details about the study](#)

PHASE 1

Evaluation of good practices

Objective - Analysis and synthesis of the good practices "SPA THERAPY & COVID" existing in Europe and more precisely the post COVID thermal practices and offers.

Results: 42 cases collected in 16 countries via digital online questionnaires.

Main lessons:

- duration of the thermal stay: 1 or 2 weeks;
- age of the patient: 86% from 41 to 60 years old
- stay: 65% between 4 and 12 weeks after the illness;
- Most of the post COVID programs are prescribed by the general practitioner;
- Most of the post COVID programs are co-financed and supported by the government;
- Dominant symptoms treated are: 81,8% respiratory problems & 68,2% musculoskeletal problems.

PHASE 3

SPA provider's perspective

Objective - Qualitative interviews with the European thermal medical spa providers who have developed and marketed these offers.

Results: eight online interviews with spa providers from eight countries.

Main lessons:

- For hospitalized patients, prescription is from a general practitioner or a gate keeping organisation;
- Programmes are proposed by rehabilitation centres based in thermal spa resorts;
- Programmes treat one leading symptom and are in accordance with the respective national system of rehabilitation;
- 3 weeks of inpatient treatment (hospital) is necessary in general;
- Therapeutic modules relying on natural healing resources are often part of the programme, but spa therapy play a minor role in the proper therapeutic concept;
- For private clients, programmes of medical thermal spas have a consistent therapeutic pillar with spa therapy;
- Social interaction is a key factor of a successful programme (group programs, group exercises...).



PHASE 2

Patient's perspective

Objective - Survey with patients who have tested these offers in order to formalize their feelings.

Results: 107 questionnaires from six countries.

Main lessons:

- Social life/leisure activities of patients were mainly disrupted;
- Most of the patients suffer from sequelae of severe forms of COVID-19 requiring inpatient treatment;
- Leading symptoms are a direct consequence of the acute phase with demanding therapies (e.g., major damage to the lung structures and function, immobility, post-viral fatigue);
- Patients have a lack of physical power and self-esteem to care for themselves and/or their convalescence;
- After the program, patients' goals have been achieved;
- Top therapies identified by post-COVID patients: inhalation – aerosol therapy, physiotherapy, physical medicine like mechano therapy.

REHABILITĀCIJA
PĒC COVID-19

JAUNĀEMERĪ
KŪRORTA REHABILITĀCIJAS CENTRS



PHASE 4

Analysis of the data collected & identification of opportunities

MULTI DIMENSIONAL PROBLEMS

Long COVID patients are complaining of multi-dimensional problems (as, e.g., neurology, musculoskeletal pain, or fatigue).

TAILOR-MADE PROGRAMS

Personalised and tailor-made programs are necessary. Thermal medical spas are competent to deliver these kinds of personalised, individual and specific programs.

THERAPIES

TOP five most effective therapies:

- Inhalation (aerosol therapy)
- Physiotherapy
- Physical medicine (respiratory re-education, exercise training, balance...)
- Psychological interventions to foster self-confidence
- Social interaction (therapeutic modules offered as "group therapy")

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Social interaction is a key factor in the recovery of the illness.

Thermal spa resorts are very well organised and equipped for this (parks and gardens, theatres, operas...) and with the natural healing resources available in spa resorts, European thermal spa resorts have a place to win.

HEALTH PREVENTION

The better the patients' health status, the less these factors affected them during the treatment period. Therefore, we have to insist on the importance of the health prevention.

RECOMMENDATIONS from the Steering Group of the Study:

1. To continue the lobbying on national health authorities and national health insurances for a better recognition and co-financing of thermal spa therapies for post-COVID rehabilitation and long COVID treatment.
2. To better position European spa therapy in the rehabilitation of post-COVID patients and in the treatment of long COVID in direction of general practitioners and gate keeping organizations for a better prescription.
3. To create personalized tailor-made and multi-dimensional programs to treat physical, mental and social conditions of the patients together with their work ability.
4. To assume a clear statement to promote prevention and health education.
5. To underline the role of balneotherapy in the prevention of certain chronic diseases of which it has been shown: that they were a factor increasing the probability of severe COVID, that they complicated or delayed the post-COVID recovery.
6. To communicate on the holistic health approach of thermal spa resorts in Europe based on natural healing therapies in natural healing environments with a very competent medical staff.
7. To highlight the specificities of spa treatment: "social dis-insertion" (which is beneficial in the case of diseases with persistent effects), personalisation of the treatment, absence of iatrogeny, treatment potentially over a long period of time, interesting economic cost for the patients and the payers, and the society (in link with the public health policies).
8. To scientifically evaluate the interest of the thermal treatment of the long COVID (in the absence of a randomised controlled trial, which is difficult to envisage for ethical reasons, by a follow-up of cohorts) and to identify a profile of responder patients (in terms of predominance of symptoms, age of the infection, co-morbidities, history of treatments...).
9. To constitute a working group of the thermal spas involved in this service to encourage exchange and feedback, and to allow a continuous improvement of services.
10. To position (in addition to the approach to the public authorities) the thermal intervention in the patients' care pathway and within the whole of the mobilizable health resources (interfacing with the hospital, the follow-up care centres, the town medicine...).

International Congress in Thermal Tourism in Ourense (Spain)

The results of the InnovaSPA project have been presented at the international congress on thermal tourism in Ourense.

The [European Historic Thermal Towns Association](#) (EHTTA) organised with the participation of the UNWTO ([United Nations World Tourism Organisation](#)) the third "International Congress on Thermal Tourism". This congress, hosted by the province of Ourense and the city council of Ourense, with the support of the region of Galicia, opened on the UNWTO World Tourism Day (27th of September) and was connected to Termatalia (the bi-annual trade fair for thermal destinations).

After similar events held in the province of Ourense in 1999 and 2011, this is the third congress on this theme. Experts from all over the world and speakers from all continents were present. Representatives of the World Tourism Organisation, the European Institute of Cultural Routes, the European Historic Thermal Towns Association (EHTTA), the European Spa Association (ESPA), the European Travel Commission and the Great Spa Towns of Europe Association (GSTE) took an active part in the exchanges and round tables.

The results of the InnovaSPA project were presented by Marion Vansingle, the project coordinator, during the "experience" round table composed of 4 international experts and moderated by Simone Zagrodnik, Executive Director of EHTTA.

InnovaSPA partners present onsite used also the opportunity for having a Steering Committee meeting of the project in Ourense.



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