

Travel Medicine

Martin Haditsch

Travel medicine is a rather young medical speciality being challenged by working in an interdisciplinary field. It is derived (depending on the geographical location of practise) from established medical fields like tropical medicine, social medicine / public health or hygiene and microbiology.

Founded about 15 years ago special education was one of the main topics, scientific work being predominantly done or supported by the International Society of Travel Medicine (ISTM; www.istm.org) especially by publications in the "Journal of Travel Medicine" which recently got listed as a ranked journal (the impact factor going to be published in 2002).

New regional (like the Asia-Pacific Travel Health Society, APTHS) or national societies (like the Austrian Society of Travel and Touristic Medicine, ASTTM) are trying to facilitate access to specific education and to contribute to the development of a global network.

Every two years the Conference of the International Society of Travel Medicine (CISTM) is held to provide basics, updates and results of scientific work in a full-time program of about four days (next time 2003 in New York). Alternately regional conferences like the European (ECTM; 15. – 18.5.02, Florence, Italy) and the Asia-Pacific Conference (APTHC 4; 21.- 23.10.02, Shanghai, China) attract more and more participants.

Besides well-established courses in tropical medicine (Basel, Hamburg) meetings focused on travel medicine (all over Germany, Linz / Austria) increasingly provide updates in this rapidly growing field.

In the beginning travel medicine was mostly dealing with vaccinations and Malaria prophylaxis. Meanwhile increasing awareness about travel related health risks has led to the development of a "body of knowledge" by the ISTM with a summary of ALL topics considered to be important facing a changing of the travelling population (age, underlying disease incl. immunodeficiency) and travel habits (adventure, culture, "back to nature"). Besides the well-known vaccine preventable diseases (VPDs) and other infectious or non-infectious diseases (like injuries and accidents) actual epidemiological informations and basics of telemedicine should be an additional part of the knowledge of every travel medicine specialist meeting the demands of an information- and communication-based society.

Therefore there is an urgent need for a specific qualification focused on the tasks of daily work especially since we are lacking quality control tools in this medical speciality worldwide. Although the ISTM launches a "Certification Exam", educational questions still remain unsolved.

This was the reason why the ASTTM has decided to develop a basic course in travel medicine which is going to be held in modules trying to meet the demands of the primary target group, i.e. family doctors / GPs. Having this advanced expertise it should be easy for them to decide which clients to serve by themselves or to refer them to special institutions.

Last but not least an official diploma of the Austrian Doctors' Chamber is a valuable tool to inform the public, to promote the individual expertise in a serious way, to raise awareness by signing up with this special education and to contribute to a nationwide (medical) service for travellers.