Patient-centeredness and empowerment are core European health values but to what extent are patients themselves considered in the development of cross-border care policy? To date, there has been little published empirical research undertaken to reveal the experiences of patients referred for cross-border specialized care. Hence, this study was initiated following a unique setting with a comparable patient cohort who underwent identical cancer treatment in Malta or in a cross-border setting in London because of reasons of undue delay. By making the best methodological use of this situation reflecting a natural “experimental design”, the study set out to explore and compare the experiences of two Maltese thyroid cancer patient groups who received radioactive iodine (RAI) therapy either in Malta or in the United Kingdom.

A systematic random sample was drawn up from routine databases and patients (n = 30), who received care in Malta or in London during the year 2012, participated in face-to-face or telephone semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, it was noted that several patients who were referred to the United Kingdom for therapy had previously received treatment in Malta which created a new patient group. The data collected were analysed qualitatively by a thematic data analysis and a SWOT analysis.

Findings suggest that patients who received care domestically benefited from being treated in a familiar setting and close to their relatives. Patients who were referred to the United Kingdom have positive experiences of receiving care in a highly specialized cancer hospital. However, these patients faced financial, information provision and follow-up hurdles and the lack of proximity from home also tended to have an impact on their experiences.

The study elicited insight on patients’ perceptions of cross-border cancer care and stimulated dialogue among stakeholders on how inter-relationships among patients, health professionals and the healthcare system reflect patient care experiences. A debriefing session was organized for practitioners and health authorities to disseminate the findings and discuss patient views of domestic and cross-border cancer care.

It is being recommended that within the long standing Malta-United Kingdom collaboration for specialized cross-border care, patient experiences are optimized in light of the patient-centered approach endorsed by the EU Patients’ Rights directive.

Key messages
- Patients should be at the heart of healthcare systems. By capturing true patient experiences of cross-border care as opposed to care at home, improvements can be made to cross-border care delivery.
- This study will not only benefit health professionals and providers but patients themselves who are referred to similar treatment in the future.