

## Medical tourism: Medical dream or nightmare?

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### Abstract

Medical tourism is an act of a foreign national traveling across international borders to undergo a particular medical procedure. India, Malaysia, Turkey, Singapore, and Thailand have established themselves as prominent destinations in the medical tourism industry, while Canada and the United Kingdom are commonly sought-after source countries for medical travelers. The medical tourism sector offers a range of benefits and drawbacks for citizens of both the source country and the destination country. Traveling long distances for medical treatment presents inherent risks such as complications during travel and exposure to unfamiliar environments. For instance, patients may face an increased risk of developing deep vein thrombosis (DVTs) due to prolonged periods of immobility during flights or other modes of transportation. The most popular desired procedures for medical tourists include elective cosmetic surgery, dental procedures, organ transplants, cardiac surgery, and orthopaedic surgery.

Medical tourism is double-edged in nature and can be both beneficial to the health system and the recipient thereof. It is however clear that various international legal and regulatory frameworks are necessitated to both protect the interests of the medical tourist and the treating medical body. There is no question that medical tourism will continue to rise in popularity, it is however prudent that potential medical tourists do their due diligence into the potential destination for their treatment of choice to better nullify the likelihood of a medical misadventure occurring.

### Introduction

Medical tourism cannot be defined, but is better explained conceptually. It is in effect the act of a foreign national travelling across international borders to undergo a particular medical procedure. The motivation for this may be financial or medicolegal.<sup>1</sup> The Medical tourism industry is a multibillion-dollar one, with figures indicating significant growth expected in the coming years. Various countries such as India, Malaysia, Turkey, Singapore, and Thailand have established themselves as prominent destinations in the medical tourism industry, while Canada and the United Kingdom are commonly sought-after source countries for medical travelers.<sup>2-4</sup>

In 2016, United Kingdom citizens sought medical treatment in 31 countries. Poland topped the list with almost 34,000 visits, followed by Hungary (15,884) and Romania (14,588). Turkey and Spain followed closely with nearly 12,000 and 10,741 visits respectively. France, Latvia, and Lithuania each saw over 5000 visits. The remaining 28% of visits were dispersed, with Switzerland (4165), Greece (3885), and India (3867) being the most frequented. Additionally, Bulgaria, the Canary Islands, Germany, Slovakia, and the USA each received over 2000 visits for medical treatment.<sup>5</sup>

### Most sort after procedures:

The most popular desired procedures for medical tourists include elective cosmetic surgery, dental procedures, organ transplants, cardiac surgery and orthopaedic surgery.

Reproductive outsourcing and reproductive healthcare tourism are emerging trends experiencing increased popularity. Procedures such as In vitro fertilization and stem cell treatments are becoming more prevalent within this realm of medical tourism, with the economic benefits - being the major driver behind these trends.<sup>3</sup>

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### Advantages of medical tourism:

The medical tourism sector offers a range of benefits and drawbacks for citizens of both the source country (where the patient originates) and the destination country (where the medical treatment is received).<sup>6</sup>

Health tourism allows individuals to take control of their health decisions and explore alternative avenues for medical care. The popularity of medical tourism is largely attributed to the high-quality care offered by destinations like Thailand and India, known for their top-notch medical centers and highly skilled doctors and nurses. These centers also utilize cutting-edge technology which means that patients often receive care that is comparable to, if not superior to the standards available in their home countries, which may not always be readily accessible and may not be as affordable.

Medical tourism destinations often offer substantial economic benefits compared to those in the patient's home country, even when insurance aids co-payments. Despite travel and accommodation expenses, patients can still expect significant financial benefits. Moreover, medical tourism destinations frequently provide shorter waiting times for procedures compared to healthcare systems burdened with long waiting lists and especially those with universal healthcare systems like such as the US, Canada and the UK.

Patients can combine medical healthcare with leisure and rejuvenation, recuperating in a pleasant environment with complete isolation and privacy. Medical tourism offers some patients the chance to travel and explore new geographies and cultures whilst obtaining medical care. Patients can combine their treatment with a vacation in picturesque settings which allows for a dual gain in terms of the patient's financial outlay. Numerous medical tourism facilities also provide tours, resort breaks and other activities to make the concept of medical tourism more enticing.<sup>7</sup>

Growth of medical tourism aids access to healthcare in countries where the necessary medical procedures are not readily available or accessible to its citizens due to legislative or economic factors. In the country of destination, medical tourism stimulates financial development, job creation, knowledge exchange, raises global healthcare standards and the quality of healthcare delivered.<sup>8</sup> Whilst addressing the advantages it is crucial to acknowledge that patients may encounter complications when seeking medical care abroad, with the risks varying based on the procedure undertaken and the patient's existing health status.

### Disadvantages of medical tourism:

Traveling long distances for medical treatment presents inherent risks such as complications during travel and exposure to unfamiliar environments. For instance, patients may face an increased risk of developing deep vein thrombosis (DVTs) due to prolonged periods of immobility during flights or other modes of transportation. Additionally, being in unfamiliar surroundings can elevate the risk of contracting local infections, further complicating the patient's recovery process.<sup>9</sup>

Language and socio-cultural barriers can significantly impede patients' interactions with healthcare providers and their understanding of medical procedures and nuances of the treatment they are bound to receive.<sup>10</sup>

Coordinating post-operative care and follow-up appointments with primary healthcare providers in the country of origin is challenging

for patients who have undergone medical treatment abroad, particularly in patients managing chronic diseases that require a multidisciplinary treatment approach. Furthermore, destination facilities may be uncooperative in sharing documentation with patients or their home healthcare providers.

This can lead to delays in receiving the necessary care especially if emergency care is required in cases of acute complications potentially impacting their recovery process and mortality rates. The transmission of antibiotic-resistant infections by patients returning from medical care abroad presents a significant national public health risk for the receiving country.

There is currently a lack of policy formulation addressing the spread of antibiotic-resistant organisms locally from outbound medical tourism. The costs associated with screening, isolation, and testing for antibiotic-resistant organisms can be exorbitant after medical tourists seek treatment upon returning home, further complicating efforts to mitigate this risk.<sup>11</sup>

A systematic review conducted by Maltezos HC showed that out of the 44 studies analyzed, they identified 589 patients who experienced complications following cosmetic procedures abroad. Infection emerged as the most common complication, followed by wound dehiscence, seroma/hematoma, and tissue necrosis. Notably, 98% of the infectious organisms were bacterial, with 81% of these belonging to the *Mycobacterium* genus.<sup>12-13</sup>

Many consultants have concerns regarding the safe acquisition of organs abroad and the selection criteria for donors.<sup>14</sup> These underscores broader concerns regarding transparency and accountability within the medical tourism industry. The medical tourism currently operates outside of any regulatory framework, leading some to perceive it as driven by profit and commodification of healthcare. This lack of regulation has sparked criticism, with concerns raised about its potential to undermine the equitable delivery of healthcare globally. These criticisms align with recent calls from the World Health Organization for universally available, primary care-oriented health systems to promote health equity.<sup>15</sup>

The absence of a regulatory framework presents numerous ethical and legal risks to the parties involved. Differing medical malpractice laws and difficulty pursuing legal recourse in the event of medical negligence as medical malpractice laws, patient rights, and liability standards may vary greatly between source country and destination country. This variance in regulations can create incongruity regarding the quality and safety of care received abroad.<sup>16</sup>

Patient autonomy in the context of medical tourism may be impeded, informed consent can be compromised by misleading or incomplete information on websites, difficulties in accessing data on success rates, and uncertainties regarding the quality of care at destination facilities.<sup>17</sup>

In tort law, the question arises as to whether patients must bear the full costs of their decisions to avoid unfairly burdening others. This concern is particularly pertinent in a universal healthcare system like Canada's, where provincial/territorial budgets are fixed, and healthcare resources are shared.<sup>18</sup> Canadian citizens may bear collectively imposed costs without enjoying the individual benefits of engaging in medical tourism, highlighting the need for careful consideration of ethical and legal implications in regulating medical tourism.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

Medical tourism is double-edged in nature and can be both beneficial to the health system and the recipient thereof. It is however

clear that various international legal and regulatory frameworks are necessitated to both protect the interests of the medical tourist and the treating medical body. There is no question that medical tourism will continue to rise in its popularity, it is however prudent that potential medical tourists do their due diligence into the potential destination for their treatment of choice to better nullify the likelihood of a medical misadventure occurring.

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