

Chapter 4

Medical Travel and Public Health: Definitions, Frameworks, and Future Research

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ABSTRACT

The medical travel market industry is growing as millions of people are crossing borders to seek healthcare services every year. Yet there is not sufficient empirical research around medical travel. People typically call all medical travelers “medical tourists,” a practice that is not helpful. Therefore, from a public health perspective, it is important to understand the definition of medical travel, the motivations behind travel, and how to overcome public health challenges that may occur as a result of this practice. Since medical travel is an experience that does not finish with obtaining health services, it is important to gather medical travelers’ profiles before and after they access healthcare services. This will allow healthcare professionals to follow medical travelers’ outcomes and assess their health-related quality of life. A robust evidence base will promote better future decisions related to medical travel. Creating an evidence base for medical travel will support upstream policies and strategies aimed at regulating the medical travel market.

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INTRODUCTION

Travelling internationally to obtain healthcare services is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon and is rapidly growing worldwide (Burkett, 2007; Chanda, 2002; Eissler & Casken, 2013; Forgione & Smith, 2007; J. N. Henson, Guy, B.S. and Dotson, M.J., 2015; Smith, 2007). Every year, the Dubai Health Authority (DHA), the government health entity that oversees healthcare facilities in the Emirate of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), pays millions of dirhams to cover thousands of UAE national patients seeking healthcare overseas. Although the government in the UAE provides “free” healthcare services to UAE nationals, in order for nationals to access primary and tertiary healthcare facilities as per the government law, there are thousands of patients who travel seeking healthcare outside the UAE under the sponsorship of DHA and other different sponsorships (*Dubai Health Authority Annual Statistic Books*, 2016).

The UAE nationals seek some of their healthcare services overseas due to reasons such as unavailability of treatment and long waiting times in the UAE. People often mix the overseas treatment terminology with the term “medical tourism”. The term “medical tourism” is not clearly defined in literature. Researchers tend to refer to all patients seeking healthcare overseas as “medical tourists”, which is a practice that is not helpful. It is important to clarify the term medical tourism, since medical travel and medical tourism cannot be used interchangeably, especially given the fact that the government of Dubai has two separate strategies. On the one hand, “Overseas Treatment Strategy” sends patients overseas to receive treatments that are unavailable in the UAE. On the other hand, “Medical Tourism Strategy” is an initiative to attract foreigners to use the private healthcare sectors combined with tourism facilities in the emirate of Dubai (Balaban, 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand the definition of medical travel and its different components. However, there have been very few empirical studies to understand the motivational factors that lead to medical travel (Guy, Henson, & Dotson, 2015; J. N. Henson, Guy, & Dotson, 2015; Metin Kozak, 2002). Information about medical travel is important to understand the motivational factors underpinning it and help governments and others to better regulate and strategize the medical travel market. Having evidence around medical travel will aid in understanding how people obtain information, make decisions when seeking healthcare overseas and, most importantly, manage the follow-up care when patients return to their home country from the treatment destinations (Turner, 2011).

Another reason to understand and study the field of medical travel is the importance of understanding medical travelers differing motivational factors when choosing treatment destinations, healthcare facilities, healthcare practitioners, and the treatment procedures. These motivational factors will vary based medical

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