

# Chapter 9

## Medical Tourism

### Patient Mortality: Considerations From a 10–Year Review of Global News Media Representations

**Alicia Mason**

*Pittsburg State University, USA*

**Sakshi Bhati**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6305-7704>

*Pittsburg State University, USA*

**Ran Jiang**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1542-3124>

*Soochow University, China*

**Elizabeth A. Spencer**

*University of Kentucky, USA*

#### ABSTRACT

*Medical tourism is a process in which a consumer travels from one's place of residence and receives medical treatment, thus becoming a patient. Patients Beyond Borders (PBB) forecasts some 1.9 million Americans will travel outside the United States for medical care in 2019. This chapter explores media representations of patient mortality associated with medical tourism within the global news media occurring between 2009-2019. A qualitative content analysis of 50 patient mortality cases found that (1) a majority of media representations of medical tourism patient death are of middle-class, minority females between 25-55 years of age who seek cosmetic surgery internationally; (2) sudden death, grief, and bereavement counseling is noticeably absent from medical tourism providers (MTPs); and (3) risk information from authority figures within the media reports is often vague and abstract. A detailed list of health communication recommendations and considerations for future medical tourists and their social support systems are provided.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

As an industry medical tourism involves both the treatment of illness and the facilitation of wellness, with travel. Broadly, medical tourism involves a process through which a consumer travels from his/her place of residency (usually to another country), receives medical treatment or care thus becoming a patient, and typically involves at least one overnight stay. Those who engage in the process of medical tourism are called ‘medical tourists’ and they do so for a variety of reasons. Many seek access to advanced medical technology, higher quality of care, and quicker access to novel or restricted medical treatments and procedures in their home countries.

Medical tourists are motivated by several factors. Lower-cost procedures and discretionary cosmetic operations represent only a small segment of the global patient base. Data from the Medical Tourism Association’s (MTA) *2016-2017 Global Buyers Guide* report is founded on 1,110 prequalified global buyers of healthcare services. Global buyers are defined as “individuals or companies that either refer patients to healthcare destinations or are involved in the selection of healthcare providers for the networks offered to traveling patients,” (p. 3). The report highlights that 72% of respondents seek orthopedic/spine and oncology/cancer care, 60% are those seeking cosmetic/plastic surgery, 54% are seeking cardiovascular treatment, 52% neurology, while 40% are seeking IVF/fertility treatments (MTA, 2017). Medical tourism patients enter the marketplace in a variety of ways with 54% using the assistance of a medical tourism facilitator (MTF), insurance company or government program, 16% are referred by local physicians, 12% receive interpersonal word of mouth (WOMC) information, 10% rely on internet research, and 8% use other means (MTA, 2017).

Proponents of medical tourism argue the marketplace is an organic and emergent bi-product of the globalized healthcare systems, digital communication technology, and international transportation that provides opportunities for affordable access to high quality healthcare in premier facilities, and expedited access to novel or emerging treatments (e.g., stem cell treatments; Hopkins, Labonté, Runnels, & Packer, 2010). Critics maintain medical tourism is a poorly regulated healthcare industry (Turner, 2011), that increases patient risk due to weak pre-operative counseling (Crooks, Turner, Snyder, Johnston, & Kingsbury, 2011), and poorly coordinated post-operative treatment plans (Mason & Wright, 2011). Critics also argue that in some destinations the process creates preferential treatment centers, or dual delivery healthcare systems, that exacerbate current health disparities in local populations (Mason, 2014; Snyder, Johnston, Crooks, Morgan, & Adams, 2017).

Affordability is a driver. For example, when quantifying the medical costs, cross-border and local transportation fees, inpatient stay, and post-operative accommodation expenses, Patients Beyond Borders (PBB) estimates the global media tourism market size is \$65-87.5 billion USD, with approximately 20-24 million cross-border patients spending an average of \$3,410 USD per visit. PBB also forecasts some 1.9 million Americans will travel outside the United States for medical care in 2019 (PBB, 2019).

## **HISTORY OF MEDICAL TOURISM IN WESTERN MEDIA**

Medical tourism, sometimes referred to as ‘healing holidays,’ ‘medical voyages,’ and ‘therapeutic journeys’ have appeared in U.S. print news publications as far back as the 1870’s. These publications often use travel narratives and promotional advertising placements to attract ‘health seekers.’ Health seekers in this era were often invalids, those with incipient consumption, and TB patients. As a result of westward

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