

British medical tourists seeking treatment overseas without sufficient information and advice

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A team of researchers has found that British people travelling abroad for medical treatment are often unaware of the potential health and financial consequences they could face.

The researchers say this can, in some cases, have catastrophic effects for individual patients.

At least 63,000 UK residents travel abroad for medical treatment each year. However, the study led by the University of York, and involving the the University of Birmingham, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Royal Holloway University and Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, concludes that many people are embarking on medical tourism without understanding the risks involved.

These include a lack of redress in many countries should things go wrong, and the costs of non-emergency care at home to rectify poor outcomes of treatments received overseas. Many people, the researchers say, are unaware that under current NHS eligibility and commissioning rules, individuals may be personally liable for these costs.

The research was funded by the National Institute for Health Research Health Services and Delivery Research (NIHR HS&DR) Programme. The study looked at the effects on the NHS of British nationals going abroad for services including dentistry, bariatric (weight-loss) surgery, fertility services and cosmetic surgery.

Principal Investigator Dr Neil Lunt, from the University of York's Department of Social Policy and Social Work, said: "We found that many people are embarking on medical tourism with insufficient information and advice, with consequences ranging from troublesome to catastrophic.

"A sample of patients revealed that while some patients had minor or no problems following treatment abroad, others faced severe health problems which in some cases were exacerbated by an inability to ensure continuity of care or obtain patient records to address patients' needs."

The researchers conclude that GPs need support and training to enable them to advise patients not only on the broad consequences of medical tourism, but also the implications of specific forms of treatments which may present particular concerns. Bariatric (weight-loss) surgery and fertility treatment are highlighted as particular areas of concern.

They also recommend that more information and advice is provided to potential medical tourists. This, they say, needs to be packaged and disseminated so it will reach those who may not consult their GP or a specialist website before travelling.

Professor Mark Exworthy (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/social-policy/exworthy-mark.aspx>), from the **Health Services Management Centre** (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/departments/health-services-management-centre/index.aspx>) at the University of Birmingham, said: "The rise of 'medical tourism' presents new opportunities and challenges in terms of treatment options for patients and health policymakers in all countries. This study helps clarify the scale and nature of these challenges for the UK. Whilst there remains much doubt about the extent and impact of medical tourism, it is likely that these issues will become more salient in the coming years."

The medical tourism study 'Implications for the NHS of Inward and Outward Medical Tourism' addressed four interrelated themes: patient decision-making; quality, safety and risk; economic implications; and provider and market development.

The researchers found that decision-making around outward medical travel involves a range of information sources, with the internet and information by informal networks of friends and peers, playing key roles. They conclude that medical tourists often pay more attention to 'soft' information rather than hard clinical information. They also found that there is little effective regulation of information – be it hard or soft – online or overseas.

Notes to editors

- The report 'Implications for the NHS of Inward and Outward Medical Tourism' (HSR 09/2001/21) will publish on the NIHR Journals Library website on 4 February 2014.
- The project was funded by the National Institute for Health Research Health Services and Delivery Research Programme (project number 09/2001/21). The National Institute of Health Research **Health Services and Delivery Research (NIHR HS&DR) Programme** (<http://www.netscc.ac.uk/hedr>) was established to fund a broad range of research. It builds on the strengths and contributions of two NIHR research programmes: the Health Services Research (HSR) programme and the Service Delivery and Organisation (SDO) programme, which merged in January 2012. The programme aims to produce rigorous and relevant evidence on the quality, access and organisation of health services, including costs and outcomes. The programme will enhance the strategic focus on research that matters to the NHS. The HS&DR Programme is funded by the NIHR with specific contributions from the CSO in Scotland, NISCHR in Wales and the HSC R&D Division, Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland.
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