

# Understanding the potential health equity impacts of medical tourism sector growth and development in Barbados



## What is medical tourism?

When patients travel internationally to privately access medical care they are engaging in what has come to be known as medical tourism. Industry reports suggest that increasing numbers of patients are opting to participate in medical tourism for a range of reasons, including the high price of medical care at home and lack of timely access to a range of health care options. A growing number of countries around the world, including Barbados, are seeking to attract these patients through concerted marketing efforts and by expanding their local private health care options.

## What are some of its reported benefits and drawbacks?

Groups with an interest in developing medical tourism focus on potential benefits, such as the influx of revenue from incoming patients, the improvement of local healthcare infrastructure, and more numerous and diverse employment opportunities for local health workers. Those that may be negatively impacted by the growth of medical tourism often raise concerns about health workers being drawn out of the public sector, industry profits leaving the destination country due to a reliance on foreign investment, and for local patients to become 'priced out' of private health care.

## What is our medical tourism research about?

Since 2010 the SFU Medical Tourism Research Group and our international collaborators have been qualitatively examining the potential health equity implications of the development of medical tourism in Barbados. Health inequities are differences in health status and access to health promoting resources between groups that are avoidable and are thus unjust or unfair. Our research examining medical tourism and health equity has been funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. Currently Barbados has a very small medical tourism sector, but there is interest in further developing it in order to attract more international patients to the island. However, medical tourism may create both health equity gains and losses in a number of areas. Our research has been primarily focused on identifying the various health equity impacts the country may experience as a result of building its medical tourism sector. We have reviewed relevant newspaper articles and reports, formally interviewed more than 60 people with varying degrees of knowledge about medical tourism in the country, toured public and private health care facilities, and conducted focus groups with nurses, citizens, and lawyers in order to identify realized and potential health equity gains and losses. Our research is not premised on the idea that medical tourism development in Barbados is either exclusively beneficial or harmful, nor has it attempted to quantitatively evaluate the potential demand for or uptake of an expanded medical tourism sector in Barbados. Instead, our work has sought to identify the full scope of health equity issues arising from the practice and how they are understood by local stakeholders.

## What have we learned?

### Foreign Investment in Health Infrastructure is Needed

Significant expansion of Barbados' medical tourism industry requires foreign investment. Increased foreign investment in health facilities is generally perceived positively by Barbadians and has been an ongoing source of activity – three new private hospital projects backed by foreign investors have been proposed in the past ten years. However, there are concerns that (over) reliance on international investment will mean that the profits from medical tourism will not remain in Barbados and that they will not be used to strengthen local resources such as the the country's public health care system.

### Increasing Competition Between Local and International Physicians is Possible

Two new hospital projects focusing on medical tourism have proposed using foreign physicians to provide services. It is thought that this will allow these hospitals to provide a wide range of care while maintaining local specialists' focus on local patients. Hiring foreign physicians is also understood as a potential source of competition for local specialists, especially if they do not have the same regulatory and tax environment as foreign competitors operating in Barbados.

### Adopting Costly International Hospital Accreditation is Likely

Hospitals that market their services internationally often incorporate expensive international accreditation schemes in order to assure patients of their quality. There is discussion of the need to adopt such accreditations in Barbados if high-paying international patients are to be attracted to the island. While medical tourism may improve range of care available at local facilities, it is unclear if this improvement will be commensurate with improved clinical outcomes, particularly in light of the high cost of pursuing international accreditations.

### A Greater Range of Health Services will be Available Locally

Barbados' small population limits the range medical specialties that can be viably sustained with local cases alone. Medical tourism has been identified not only as a source of additional financial support for clinics and hospitals in Barbados, but also as a means to increase the range of medical specialties that are available to Barbadians.