

## Canadian Family Doctors' Roles and Responsibilities Towards Outbound Medical Tourists

### What is medical tourism?

Medical tourism occurs when patients travel internationally with the intention of obtaining privately funded medical care. Our research team, based at Simon Fraser University (in British Columbia, Canada), studies medical tourism from a number of perspectives.

### What should Canadian family doctors know about medical tourism?

While Canadian patients are going abroad for medical care to a range of countries and for various procedures, this issue has received little formal attention from family medicine. Given the health and safety concerns associated with medical tourism, it is important that family doctors be made aware of the existence of medical tourism, the possibility that their patients may have questions about this practice, and be provided with better tools and information to help mitigate some of the impacts it may have on their patients and practice.

### What our research can tell Canadian family doctors about their roles and responsibilities towards outbound medical tourists:

Through our qualitative research we have ascertained what many family doctors see as their roles and responsibilities to be towards patients in their practices considering or ultimately engaging in medical tourism.

- Family doctors are often not made aware of their patients' medical travel prior to or following care abroad. When patients do consult with family doctors prior to going, it is often to have them give advice on their choice of destination and procedure. Family doctors often do not want to play this role as they are concerned over their legal liability to patients if they are perceived to be endorsing a particular facility or provider, and they may be unable to assess the quality of care abroad.
- Family doctors generally do want to be informed of their patients' plans to travel for medical care. Family doctors thought pre-trip consultations could help them understand a patient's motivations to travel for care, which could identify navigational barriers in the Canadian system where they could guide or advocate for their patient more effectively.
- Family doctors typically want to do their best to ensure that patients receive the necessary follow-up care upon returning home. However, uncertainty exists about their ability to refer these patients to willing specialists for follow-up care that is not an emergency. There are also concerns that patients may request follow-up tests or procedures that family doctors deem as unnecessary or are unfamiliar with. There is recognition that an inability or unwillingness to provide such care might damage the doctor-patient relationship.
- Medical tourism poses challenges to the traditional roles and responsibilities of Canadian physicians, and little guidance from professional bodies is available. If they feel comfortable doing so, family doctors can play an important role in providing information to Canadian patients considering medical tourism by ensuring that they have access to accurate information about the risks, benefits and costs of this practice.

For more information: [www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism/](http://www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism/)

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