

Canadian patients' perspectives regarding the use of medical tourism for hip and knee surgery

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.

Why are osteoarthritis patients leaving Canada for hip and knee surgery?

Due to Canada's aging population, rates of arthritis and the demand for hip and knee replacement surgery have increased. System capacity has not always been able to meet this demand, in some cases resulting in lengthy wait times for these surgeries. While wait times are an important driver of medical tourism for hip and knee surgeries, they are not the only reason individuals seek treatment abroad. Candidates for hip or knee surgery commonly decide to go abroad for three main reasons: discontent with the Canadian healthcare system, preference to avoid real or perceived wait times for care, and/or the desire to get the best possible care, including procedures not available in Canada.

What our research is showing about the perspectives of Canadian medical tourists seeking hip or knee surgery for osteoarthritis abroad:

Interviews with former Canadian medical tourists who chose to undergo hip and knee surgery internationally suggest three common characteristics among this group.

- Compared to those who access hip or knee surgery at home, medical tourists are less likely to believe that osteoarthritis is a normal part of aging. These people are heavily motivated by a desire to maintain or resume active lives without immobility, including continued employment, volunteer activities, and physical hobbies. They are commonly convinced of the need for prompt surgery in order to decrease pain and restore quality of life. Going overseas is viewed as a method to speed up this process.
- These individuals justify their decision to go abroad by identifying limitations in the Canadian health care system, including real or perceived barriers to accessing timely surgery. Lack of domestic access to hip resurfacing, which is less invasive than hip replacement, is also often cited as an issue.
- Medical tourists seeking osteoarthritic surgery tend to be comfortable making healthcare decisions without physician input. They seek out information independently, consider the reputation and credentials of surgeons abroad, and value personal testimonies from former medical tourists. Previous international travel is another key factor in their decision to go abroad.
- Given that these individuals may not consult with their regular physicians before or after going abroad for care, Canadian doctors should be proactive in identifying patients that require education on the risks and benefits of medical tourism for these procedures.

For more information: www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism

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