

Canadian Patients' Decision-Making in Medical Tourism

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.

How do Canadian patients decide to go abroad as medical tourists?

Canadian patients' motivations for engaging in medical tourism are most commonly characterized as being prompted by domestic wait times for treatment. These characterizations are typically seen in media reports about outbound medical tourism by Canadian patients. The process for deciding whether and where to engage in medical tourism is usually only presented anecdotally – for example via word-of-mouth or independent research on the internet.

What our research is showing about Canadian patients' decision-making in medical tourism:

Our qualitative research has identified some of the complexities of the decision-making process relating to Canadian patients' motivations for going abroad, the information sources consulted, and their ethical perspectives.

- While wait times are commonly cited as a motivation for Canadians to go abroad as medical tourists, cost savings and the domestic availability of procedures are also important motivations. These motivations often co-exist and their relative importance can change throughout the course of patients' decision-making in medical tourism.
- Testimonials from past medical tourists and word-of-mouth information play a key role in medical tourists' information gathering process. Family physicians are unlikely to be consulted during this process.
- Prospective medical tourists commonly consult medical tourism facilitators (i.e., agents who arrange for care abroad) and marketing websites during the decision-making process.
- Canadian health professionals have raised concerns about whether or not medical tourists can provide informed consent to medical procedures abroad. This is because most information sources consulted during the decision-making process are marketing-focused and do not provide adequate insight into risks. Domestic informational interventions for medical tourists could be a helpful tool to deal with this issue.
- Many Canadian medical tourists characterize their decisions to go abroad for treatment as ethically justified. They feel that domestic wait times and systemic limitations are unethical, which justifies their decisions to pursue medical care outside Canada.

For more information: www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism/

Contact us: medtour@sfu.ca

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