

Ethical Concerns about Canadian Patients' Involvement 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.

What ethical concerns exist about Canadian involvement in medical tourism?

Canadian patients' use of medical tourism services raises important ethical concerns, ranging from those focused on an individual patient's safety to those focused on the national health care system. For example, the negative impacts that medical tourism can have on health care systems raises significant concerns about health equity (i.e., the fair distribution and use of health care) both in Canada and the countries Canadian patients visit for medical care.

What our research is showing about the ethical issues related to Canadian patients engaging in medical tourism:

Through talking with Canadian industry members, former medical tourists, and health care providers, our qualitative research has identified some important ethical issues.

- Significant concerns exist regarding the ability of medical tourists to provide informed consent to procedures taking place abroad. Given the low levels of health literacy for many Canadians and the lack of risk communication within the industry, Canadian medical tourists may not be meeting the standards of informed consent to the risks entailed by engaging in medical tourism.
- Some Canadian patients consider medical tourism to be an ethical response to unethical features of the Canadian health system – such as wait times and the unavailability of some procedures. While some express reservations about jumping ahead of other patients on domestic waiting lists by paying privately for medical care abroad, most Canadian medical tourists we have spoken with feel ethically justified in pursuing care options abroad.
- The use of public resources from Canada's health system, such as when a medical tourist requires follow-up care after returning home, is considered by some to be ethically problematic. This is because, if medical complications arise as a result of medical tourism that require treatment upon return home, the cost of this treatment falls on the domestic system.
- It is thought that medical tourism may exacerbate health inequities in destination countries, as medical tourists make use of what might be a limited health infrastructure, possibly drawing off resources from public systems. Evidence regarding the health equity impacts of medical tourism in destination nations, whether positive or negative, is sorely lacking.

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

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