

Health and Safety Risks in Outbound Medical Tourism by Canadian Patients

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 health and safety risks are faced by Canadian medical tourists?

Canadian patients face a variety of health and safety risks when going abroad for medical care. All medical procedures are associated with inherent risks, such as the risks of complication and transmission of disease or infection. Travel is also associated with inherent risks, such as personal safety risks in destination countries and the psycho-emotional stress of undergoing medical care while being apart from friends and family. The health and safety risks associated with medical tourism are not limited to time spent abroad. For example, going abroad for medical care can leave patients with a discontinuous medical record, which can have negative implications for ongoing and follow-up care.

What our research is showing about the risks faced by Canadian patients abroad:

Our qualitative research has confirmed that Canadian health and safety officials hold concerns about many of the risks commonly discussed in the medical tourism literature. These professionals' perspectives also add new insights to this patient safety and care quality issue.

- Patients seeking medical attention abroad may be exposed to medical complications or unnecessary pain due to a lack of adequate protocols abroad.
- Patients' lack of access to non-industry-based, non-promotional information (or, in other words, information that offers a neutral stance) about procedures and clinics abroad may inhibit their abilities to make informed decisions about obtaining medical treatment in another country.
- Patients may be exposed to antibiotic-resistant organisms while abroad, which poses an infection control risk to public health upon their return to Canada.
- Medical tourists may not travel abroad on their own, thereby exposing their travel companions to unique risks (e.g., development of caregiver burden) in addition to some of the same ones experienced by medical tourists.
- Promoting health literacy among patients can mitigate some of the health and safety risks associated with medical tourism. Through informational resources, greater communication, and travel medicine consultations Canadians thinking about going abroad can make safer and more informed decisions about their care.

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

Contact us: medtour@sfu.ca

© 2012, SFU Medical Tourism Research Group, British Columbia, Canada