

Industry Perspectives on Informal Caregiving 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.

Who are caregiver-companions in medical tourism?

Informal caregiving occurs in medical tourism when family members, friends, or supportive individuals accompany a patient seeking private medical treatment abroad. These individuals, referred to here as caregiver-companions, may provide support during planning stages, while abroad, and upon return home. They are often in contact with staff in medical tourism facilities who provide support, information and advice. Our research suggests that caregiver-companions are typically well-received by industry employees, but that they can also present some challenges to facilities and staff.

What challenges can caregiver-companions pose for medical tourism facilities?

Through interviews with international patient coordinators who interact with caregiver-companions, we have synthesized some of the risks and challenges of caregiver-companions' participation in medical tourism.

- Bringing a caregiver for support will increase financial expenses for patients through flights, accommodation, and food costs. Caregivers often require emotional and instructional support from staff, which in effect redirects time and resources away from the patient.
- Confusion over roles can arise when caregiver-companions assist with daily activities that are usually the responsibility of nurses, such as toileting and recovery exercises. The overlap in care can impede patient symptom monitoring and continuous record keeping.
- Care quality for the patient may be compromised due to the disregard of facility norms by caregiver-companions, such as visiting limits. Both over-involved caregiver-companions and passive or neglectful ones can limit the facility staff's ability to provide the best care possible.
- It is common for caregiver-companions to experience stress from uncertainty of the patient's health outcomes and from lack of trust in the facility, system, and country in which the procedure takes place. The emotional strain and anxiety can have negative health impacts. They are also subject to the general risks of travel, such as exposure to unsafe drinking water, theft, and financial exploitation, as well as everyday risks.
- Support, advice, and education by medical tourism facility staff can reduce stress, excess burdens, and negative outcomes for caregiver-companions.

For more information: www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism

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