

Roles and Responsibilities of Informal Caregivers 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. Caregiver-companions provide many forms of emotional and physical care prior to, during, and after the trip. While many individuals find informal caregiving to be rewarding, caregiver-companions in the context of medical tourism can face additional challenges related to language barriers, finances, and emotional strain.

What roles are performed by caregiver-companions in medical tourism?

Through our qualitative research we have identified three caregiver-companion roles performed in medical tourism: companion, navigator, and knowledge broker.

- The companion role is to provide emotional and physical support to medical tourists leading up to, during, and following the procedure. Responsibilities often include: getting food and water, fetching items, providing mobility assistance, and bathing and assisting with toileting (depending on the patient's mobility). The companion also plays an important role in monitoring symptoms and providing aftercare. Although many friends and family members choose to assume the companion role, facilities abroad are typically set up to provide care regardless.
- Caregiver-companions take on a navigator role when coordinating paperwork and complex travel plans. Responsibilities of the navigator include logistical matters such as geographic and cultural navigation, tracking paperwork, keeping information and files, and ensuring that documents and finances are arranged prior to departure. The navigator role arises from a perceived need for medical tourists to be free from such concerns in order to focus on recovery; although, in most cases, the medical tourists and companions do the pre-trip planning together.
- The knowledge broker role is associated with transferring information between the medical tourist, health care providers, and staff at medical tourism facilities. Caregiver-companions assist with inquiry, clarification, translation, and retention of information. For example, a caregiver-companion can be a 'second set of ears' when listening to post-operative directives from a doctor, thereby assisting with ensuring that aftercare is done correctly when the patient returns home.
- While caregiver-companions are an invaluable resource to some medical tourists, they also require time, attention, and resources, which can disrupt the quality of care provided to the medical tourist. An "over-protective" or distressed caregiver-companion may prove to be more challenging than helpful, and can impede the ability of healthcare workers to care for the patient. Many caregiver-companions also face stress and burnout and are subject to the general risks of travel as well.

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

Contact us: medtour@sfu.ca

© 2014, SFU Medical Tourism Research Group, British Columbia, Canada