

Circumvention Medical Tourism

What is medical tourism?

Medical tourism occurs when patients travel internationally with the intention of obtaining privately funded medical care. Canadians seek medical care abroad for many reasons, including long wait times, cost, and to circumvent the domestic health system. Our research team, based at Simon Fraser University (in British Columbia, Canada), studies medical tourism from a number of perspectives.

Circumvention tourism:

Circumvention tourism occurs when patients travel abroad for medical care that is illegal or unapproved by regulators in their home countries. In some cases, circumvention tourists may be seeking unproven medical interventions. This practice avoids the regulatory restrictions that protect patients from harm and fraud and can threaten patient safety and the safety of third parties who come into contact with these patients or serve as donors of tissue or reproductive services. Circumvention tourism also has the potential to slow the process of research, as patients go abroad for interventions and opt out of domestic clinical trials. Untested interventions that are disguised as clinical trials may also undermine the legitimacy of real clinical trials, especially in the eyes of the public for whom the distinction could be hard to discern.

Key findings on circumvention tourism in the Bahamas:

- The Bahamas offers individuals access to treatments that have been approved in other places, but not yet in their home countries. High-Intensity Focused Ultrasound (HIFU) treatment for prostate cancer, which is approved in Canada and the EU but not the US, is one example. Patients may believe the intervention is effective because it has been approved elsewhere and that their domestic regulatory agency is acting too slowly to approve the treatment. HIFU treatment is performed in the Bahamas by US-based doctors in cooperation with local health workers, which allows doctors to gain new skills that will be useful when and if HIFU is approved locally.
- Recently, the Bahamas passed legislation that will ease the way for offering unproven stem cell interventions for a range of conditions including vascular disease, cancer, kidney disease, and others. While some stem cell treatments have recently received regulatory approval, others have not been demonstrated as safe and effective in clinical trials, let alone been approved for human use by any major Western regulator. In this way, circumvention stem cell tourism can complicate informed decision-making, as individuals may be vulnerable to engage in decision-making that's predicated on hope without a full understanding of the likelihood of success or understanding of risk.
- Countries receiving circumvention tourists can benefit through economic diversification and less reliance on the volatile traditional tourism industries. We found that the Bahamas will have a hard time competing with other Caribbean countries on costs for medical services, so the opportunity to offer specialist treatments like HIFU and stem cell injections gives the Bahamas a chance to compete for international patients.

For more information: www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism

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