

Content Analysis of Medical Tourists' Patient Testimonials

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.

Risk and informed decision-making:

While medical tourism provides safe and timely access to care for many of its users, seeking care abroad may also entail new risks for participants. For example, patients receiving medical care abroad may be at an increased risk of contracting an infection and having post-operative strains on their recovery as a result of tourist activities or travelling back to their home country. Medical tourism can undermine continuity of care, as care is administered internationally and medical records are often not transferred between the patient's home physician and health care professionals abroad. For some, obtaining aftercare upon returning to their home country can be difficult, as patients may face barriers in finding doctors to administer care. Despite these risks, the video testimonials we examined, supported by medical tourism facilitation companies, only portray positive messages of medical tourism as a treatment option and included no references to these risks and potential harms. This has important impacts on informed decision-making, as prospective patients may not have access to information about the potential downsides of medical tourism and steps for reducing risks.

Key findings on content analysis of patient testimonial videos:

Through our content analysis of patient testimonial videos hosted on the YouTube channels of medical tourism facilitation companies, we have identified three thematic categories.

- Medical tourism facilitators are akin to travel agents who help to guide people seeking treatment abroad to specific facilities. Their income sources are often not transparent and include referral payments from international clinics, raising concerns about conflicts of interests. Patient testimonials often included facilitator characteristics, including mentions of the facilitator by name and reference to the place of treatment or to cost savings. Speakers were enthusiastic in their portrayal of these messages and these points were often repeated more than once.
- Patient testimonial videos communicated information about the services provided, including the quality and availability of the surgeon or health care professionals, the quality and friendliness of the support staff, reference to the quality and expediency of care, and reference to the general cleanliness and services provided by the clinic/hospital.
- Finally, testimonials featured enthusiastic referrals for other persons considering engaging in medical tourism. They took the form of encouraging any and all prospective patients to participate in medical tourism, and often included several variations of the claim that 'it was the best decision of their life.' Since individuals tend to give a great deal of credence to first-hand accounts when making important health-related decisions, these claims may be extremely influential on potential medical tourists' decision-making.

For more information: www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism

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