

Title	Implications of Medical Tourism
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Precis	Medical tourism is a rapidly growing industry fueled by rapid advances in electronic communication and the ease of international travel.
Notes to Production and Artwork notes	Artwork suggestions include but not limited to: woman in the act of traveling, woman being counseling by nurse in an outpatient setting, woman or women in a foreign country

Callouts

Approximately 1 million medical tourists from North American seek care in a foreign country, often a lesser-developed country, every year and this number is expected to grow

While this is a growing industry, its effects are largely unknown and hotly contested in the health care community given the potential for unregulated and inequitable global health care delivery

Clinical Implications

Medical tourism is a rapidly growing industry fueled by rapid advances in electronic communication and the ease of international travel.

The most commonly cited reasons for medical tourism are affordability, accessibility, and acceptable quality.

Emerging companies are hiring nurse case managers to aid medical tourists seeking health care services in foreign countries.

Nurses can play a key role in shaping policies and laws associated with an industry that is fraught with quality, safety, and ethical issues.

It is estimated that close to 1 million medical tourists from North American seek care in a foreign country, often a lesser-developed country, every year and this number is expected to grow (Nguyen & Gaines, 2018). Approximately half of medical tourists are women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). While this is a growing industry, its effects are largely unknown and hotly contested in the health care community given the potential for unregulated and inequitable global health care delivery (Johnston, Crooks, Snyder, & Kingsbury, 2010).

Definitions

Medical tourism is defined as an emerging industry to aid persons residing in one country to travel to another country to seek medical, surgical, or dental, care. Treatment can be considered obligatory or elective, meaning that treatment is required to manage a life-threatening condition or it may be dependent on personal preferences or desires. In some cases, the treatment might be unavailable or illegal in the home country or optionally available more quickly or cost-effective elsewhere (Jones & Keith, 2006). *Health or wellness tourism* is a broader term that includes travel to another country for preventive or rehabilitative health reasons that incorporate rest, exercise, weight management, cleansing, diet, and use of herbs. *Domestic medical tourism* is yet another related term referring to individuals who travel to a different city or region within the same country to receive what they perceive as superior or less expensive care than they have access to in their home city.

Driving Forces

Many factors drive a person's decision to seek health care outside of the United States. Rapid advances in electronic communication and ease of international travel have facilitated growth of the medical tourism industry. Internet technology has opened the door for connecting potential medical travelers with health care providers almost anywhere in the world. Once a connection

has been made, an intricate and well-developed system of air travel allows individuals to reach even remote destinations in a matter of hours.

The most commonly cited reasons for engaging in medical tourism are affordability, accessibility, and acceptable quality. Procedures, treatments, and pharmaceuticals may be 40% to 90% less expensive than what is available in the United States (Eissler & Casken, 2013; Dalstrom, 2013). Decreased cost can, however, be associated with less stringent regulation and quality monitoring, thereby compromising safety. Some prospective medical tourists may be seeking procedures, therapies, or medications not available to them in the United States due to lack of insurance, lack of FDA approval, or long wait times for surgical procedures (Hopkins, Labonte, Runnels, & Packer, 2010; Runnels, Labonte, Packer, et al, 2014). Immigrants also contribute to the number of medical tourists from the United States as they may prefer to return to their home countries for health care or traditional medicine. In addition, governments and insurers may “outsource” individuals through contractual arrangements with institutions in other countries for treatment at their health care facilities (Whittaker, 2015, p. 486).

Commonly Treated Conditions

The most common conditions for which women seek care outside of the United States are cosmetic surgery, bariatric procedures, treatment for women’s cancers, and reproductive health procedures such as abortion and fertility treatment. Dentistry, organ transplantation, orthopedic and spine surgery, cardiac surgeries, and LASIK procedures are common conditions sought by both men and women. However, any type of health care can be accessed via medical tourism including but not limited to mental health programs, complementary and alternative medicine, rehabilitation, hospice care, and burial services.

Of those traveling abroad to seek cosmetic surgery, approximately 91% are females between the ages of 40 and 54. The most common procedures sought are breast augmentation, abdominoplasty, liposuction, bariatric surgery, and facial reconstruction (nose reshaping, eyelid surgery, and facelifts) (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2018). Cosmetic surgery tourism is frequently marketed as all-inclusive vacation packages that include recovery in a luxury setting. While insurance does not cover these vacation/surgery packages, the major selling point is the low cost of the entire package totaling less than a single procedure performed in the United States (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2018).

Women may also travel to other countries to seek reproductive health care. Reproductive outsourcing is occurring in response to the rapid advances in care where restrictive laws or outdated policies exist. Women and their partners travel outside the United States to gain access to fertility procedures that are prohibitively expensive, highly regulated, or not available at home (Jones & Keith, 2006). Women residing in countries with policies that restrict access to abortion often seek services elsewhere, citing that abortion was illegal locally or that they had passed the gestational limit for a legal abortion at home (Gerds, DeZordo, Mishtal, Barr-Walker, & Lohr, 2016). Cohen (2012) labels this as *circumvention tourism*-- a circumstance where penalties set by a native country's criminal law are avoided by going abroad to engage in the same activity where it is not illegal.

Birth tourism, a form of medical tourism, is defined as travel to another country to give birth to obtain citizenship or other benefits such as health care or education for the newborn (Ji & Bates, 2018). The United States is one of about 33 countries where birthright citizenship (the legal term being *jus soli*) is possible (Numbers USA, 2009). The derogatory term of "anchor baby" is often used to describe infants born in the United States to women who traveled for the

sole purpose of giving birth and gaining U.S. citizenship to their children. Historically, this act has offered some assurance that the woman can continue to reside in the country where the child is now a citizen.

Reproductive tourism is a controversial activity that raises multiple legal, ethical, and moral questions. Pennings (2002) suggests that reproductive tourism is a form of “moral pluralism” (p. 337) that allows individuals to cross national borders to prevent conflict between the legal majority who impose one view and persons in the minority who claim to have a moral right to access a specific reproductive service. In addition, there are inequalities and abuse related to the recruitment and the use of poor women’s bodies for surrogacy and ova donation outside of the United States (Whittaker & Speier, 2010).

Cancer care is another area that is quickly gaining attention. Often both female and male travelers seeking oncology care are doing so because they have run out of FDA-approved options and are seeking treatments or drug trials that have not been approved for use in the United States or because of coverage limitations in their health insurance. Outcomes of oncology care abroad are often poor due to the advanced state of the cancer once this option is explored.

Organ transplantation tourism, utilized slightly more often by males, has increased in popularity over the last 20 years and now accounts for approximately 10% of all transplants worldwide (Tsai, et al 2017). Kidney and liver transplants are the most frequently sought. Professional organizations are calling for mandatory registration policies for overseas transplantation to promote safety and quality and to prevent organ trafficking (Tsai, et al 2017). Uterine transplantation is on the horizon with Saudi Arabia and Sweden being the first countries to offer this procedure (Johannesson & Jarvholm, 2016). It is likely that this practice will be expanding to other countries, including the United States.

Challenges and Opportunities

The growth of the medical tourism has opened opportunities for nurses. Many emerging companies are hiring nurses as case managers to guide consumers' decisions and coordinate travel abroad. Nurses are well-positioned to describe the benefits and risks of seeking care abroad. Risks and complications that may arise include infection, deep vein thrombosis, lack of follow up care, and pharmaceuticals and devices that do not meet U.S. standards or regulations. If complications occur after a medical tourist returns to the United States, it may be difficult for local providers to treat due to lack of health care records detailing how the procedure was originally performed. Especially for cosmetic procedures, revision surgeries can be more complicated than the initial operation and patients rarely get the desired results (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2018).

Individuals need to be prepared to endure long stays abroad, which could result in a considerable burden to their families who are traveling with them or supporting them from the home country (Whittaker, 2015). Financial advising is another crucial aspect of patient counseling. While the procedures themselves may be less expensive abroad, the increased cost associated with travel, housing, and potential complications can mount. On the other hand, immigrants returning to their home country for care may have reduced housing costs if they can stay with a relative during their care and treatment (Jang, 2017). Language and communication barriers may also pose problems and medical tourists tend to prefer destination countries with similar language and cultural backgrounds (Dehdashti-Shahrokh & Nakhaei, 2016). Some travel companies suggest that a person should take out a loan against their life insurance policies or other savings as a source of funding medical tourism. A knowledgeable case manager can protect potential travelers and assist them in making sound decisions. On the average, medical tourists

take about 6 months to make an ultimate decision to access care abroad (Johnston, Crooks, & Snyder, 2012).

There is huge variation in quality and safety of travel destinations, services, and providers. To aid consumers in selecting a travel destination for health care, the International Healthcare Research Center (IHRC, 2016) has developed the Medical Tourism Index, which is accessible online at <http://www.healthcareresearchcenter.org/medical-tourism-index/>. This tool is intended to measure country-based performance in three domains: (1) country, (2) industry, and (3) medical facility and personnel. The measure is intended to help individuals, public policy-makers, and representatives of the medical tourism industry to assess appropriateness, quality, and feasibility of travel destinations for the health care needed. First published in September 2015, it is intended to be a worldwide reference point for comparing travel destinations. Additional resources for consumers and health care providers may be found in Box 1.

Conclusion

Medical tourism increases global health care access, but creates new challenges for nurses and other health care providers. With increased access to global health and treatment options, entrepreneurs are setting up businesses to facilitate access to health care abroad. The profit margin of companies marketing medical tourism services often leads to the posting of exaggerated or inflated outcomes (Hohm, & Snyder, 2015). Nurses who are well-informed of the implications of this growing service can best guide women who are considering medical tourism. It is also essential that nurses have a seat at the table as laws and policies are developed to shape the medical tourism industry and challenge the limits of ethics, policy, and legality in this most important trend in modern health care (Jones & Keith, 2006).

Box 1. Selected Resources for Health Care Providers

Resource	Description
CDC – Medical Tourism https://www.cdc.gov/features/medicaltourism/	Discusses risks of medical tourism and how to minimize those risks
CDC Yellow Book https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/yellowbook-home	CDC Health Information for International Travel (commonly called the Yellow Book) is published every two years as a reference for health professionals providing care to international travelers and is a useful resource for anyone interested in staying healthy abroad.
Health-Tourism.Com https://www.health-tourism.com	Health-Tourism.com is a consumer resource and offers a searchable medical tourism guide and a directory of medical centers
International Healthcare Research Center (IHRC) http://www.healthcareresearchcenter.org/	Promotes and provides transparency and improves global healthcare quality, population health management, expanded access to care, and the consumer healthcare experience. The IRHC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research center, headquartered in the United States.
Medical Tourism Association® http://www.medicaltourismassociation.com	Global nonprofit association for the medical tourism and international patient industry.
Patients Beyond Borders https://patientsbeyondborders.com/	Has a mission to connect consumers with internationally accredited hospitals, clinics, ministries of health, ministries of tourism, private hospital associations, and other health initiatives.
World Health Organization statement of Patient Safety and Medical Tourism http://www.who.int/global_health_histories/seminars/kelley_presentation_medical_tourism.pdf	A PowerPoint presentation with supporting data and information

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