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Health Tourism

Health tourism refers to non-UK residents travelling to the UK with the specific intention of using NHS services.

It is estimated that the government spends between £100 and £300 million per year on 'deliberate' health tourism. When the cost of treating non-UK residents who didn't come to the UK specifically to seek treatment (such as holiday makers and temporary workers) is added, the total spend amounts to around £1.8 billion.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding around health tourism, and the topic often ignites a wider debate about immigration. As the debate gained momentum in the time surrounding Brexit, the government reacted by amending health tourism legislation.

In April 2015, the government introduced new regulations requiring non-EEA nationals without personal health insurance to pay 150% of the NHS national tariff for any treatment they receive. A&E and emergency services remain free to all patients.

As of 2017, foreign patients can be refused non-emergency operations unless they pay for the treatment upfront. In July 2019, the Department of Health reported that these charges had raised a total of £1.3 billion since their introduction.

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Going Abroad for Medical Care

Medical tourism is when a person travels to another country for medical care. Each year, millions of US residents participate in medical tourism. Medical tourists from the United States commonly travel to Mexico and Canada, as well as countries in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

People may travel to another country to get health care for many reasons, including:

- Cost: To get treatment or a procedure that may be cheaper in another country.
- Culture: To receive care from a healthcare provider who shares the traveler's culture and language.
- Unavailable or Unapproved procedure: To get a procedure or therapy that is not available or approved in the United States.

The most common procedures that people undergo on medical tourism trips include dental care, surgery, cosmetic surgery, fertility treatments, organ and tissue transplantation, and cancer treatment.

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What is Health Tourism?

Health tourism is a form of tourism that consists of patients traveling to other countries to get medical treatment or assistance. It comprises all the services associated with tourism like transport, accommodation, and hospitality. Health tourism consists of medical tourism, wellness tourism (to enhance health), and spa tourism (spas that combine medical and health components). The three components are different but also overlap.

Wellness tourism, in particular, is a broad concept; and its meaning depends on culture and geography in the EU. For example, in southern Europe, wellness tourism is connected to the seaside, the Mediterranean diet, and the slower pace of life. In Scandinavia, the focus of wellness is on outdoor activities like walking and swimming. As

you can see, the definition of wellness tourism is diverse across the EU and serves as proof of the overlap between wellness and spa tourism.

All in all, the definition of health tourism is not really clear, making it difficult to include it in tourism statistics. That consequently makes it tricky to measure the importance, growth, and impact of health tourism on the overall tourism industry and economy.

However, we do know that the market for health tourism has grown exponentially in recent years and has led to new forms of health tourism like fertility tourism and dental tourism.

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Why Do People Travel for Healthcare?

Patients choose cross-border treatments for various reasons: The possibility of having access to certain treatments that are not available in their countries, the lower cost and higher quality of the treatments; and the opportunity to have a holiday to rest and recover in the destination country. Patients may even spend more time in a hotel than they would at a hospital during their medical trip. Depending on the procedure, they often spend a couple of nights at a hospital and spend the rest of the time in a hotel for recovery or doing physical therapy.

A European Commission [survey](#) shows that a large proportion of EU citizens, about 49 percent, is willing to travel for health care. That may be due to the EU directive on healthcare, which says that Member States must reimburse their citizens at the value that the care they receive would cost at home (in order to protect the financial sustainability of national healthcare systems).

However, this gives certain disadvantages to patients from poorer countries with less developed healthcare systems. For example, healthcare services cost substantially less money in Croatia than in Sweden. So a Croatian patient would have to pay out of pocket for the substantial difference in the cost of treatment if they seek medical treatment. Whereas, a patient from a wealthier Member State can seek treatment in Croatia or anywhere else without paying much out of pocket for their care. That scenario is particularly beneficial for wealthier member states as they make economic gains if the treatment is less expensive abroad.

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Health tourism in Italy

Until now, tourists have been attracted by artistic and natural beauty of the country. The authorities however plan to invest more and develop health tourism in Italy and benefit from the growing numbers of medical tourists.

Recently, Italian hospitals have won the gold seal of quality in the European ranking of hospitals which is awarded by the prestigious Joint Commission International. This commission certifies adherence to 368 safety and standards and quality of care.

The health tourism boom was initiated by an agreement adopted two years ago by the EU. It allows citizens of 28 countries of the EU to receive treatment in all other countries of the Union.

The hunt for medical tourists has therefore already begun and the stakes are very high.

A study by Deloitte estimates that worldwide every year 7 million people take a trip for health reasons. A turnover of 100 billion dollars is generated annually which is expected to increase to 150 billion dollars in 2018. The revenues generated by medical tourism in Europe amount to about 12 billion euros. Today, Italy represents 17% of the medical tourism share in Europe, amounting to 2 billion euros. According to international observers, this number could increase to 4 billion euros. Italian health tourism promoters are well aware that the country has a great potential. Recent surveys revealed that 53% of Europeans are ready to seek healthcare in other countries of the EU. Italy offers quality treatment especially in the field of neurology, cardiac surgery, oncology, bariatric surgery, and orthopedics.

Currently, the balance of health tourism in Italy is somewhat negative. Only 5,000 foreigners seek treatment in the country every year compared to 200,000 Italian patients who go abroad. Italians are not so patient to cross the Alps in need of a delicate surgery or cutting-edge treatment. It is because people are looking for lower prices of the treatment and other services.