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Medical travel; a regulation free zone?

Context Unregulated and uncontrolled movement of medical travellers poses a major concern for the health care market. Although some regulations are in place (e. g. NAFTA for North America, the Patients' Rights Directive for EU patients), these frameworks often fail to consider the much wider needs of patients traveling for care. We address the existing gaps in medical travel regulation, and outline the key issues that need to be considered to ensure economic, ethical and legal viability in medical travel.

Approach We scoped scientific as well as grey literature to identify the existing economic and legal procedures and practices relevant to medical travel. Articles were selected if they were referenced in recent medical tourism reviews, produced by major international organisations, or if they were found in at least one of six databases under the term "medical travel", or "medical tourism".

Results Medical travel economically benefits both inbound countries (in terms of increased revenue, efficiency gains, and quality), as outbound countries (in terms of increased access and affordability). Identified economic risks include the rise of the two-tiered health system (as seen in Thailand), ambiguous responsibilities for payments abroad, the potential spread of infectious disease, and the lack of control and quality standards. From the legal perspective, risks involve lacking medical record transfers between hospitals, unregulated activities of third-party mediating agencies that facilitate medical travel, and a possibly compromised provision of follow-up care.

Recommendations Regulatory oversight over the full process of medical travel is necessary. The following four steps need to be prioritised:

FOUR PRIORITY STEPS TO REGULATORY OVERSIGHT

- 1 **Neutralise the emergence of two-tiered systems, for instance by introducing a tax policy that subsidizes provision to locals**
- 2 **Establish a legal framework for medical travel to address both the economic and legal issues**
- 3 **Establish international quality standards and accreditation to limit doubtful practice**
- 4 **Consider allowances for social support during medical travel**

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Further details on this project available in the following:

Hinrichs, S., Bußmann, S., Dobyns, C., Kácha, O., Ratzmann, N., Holm Thorvaldsen, J., Ruggeri, K. Key considerations for an economic and legal framework facilitating medical travel. *Frontiers in Public Health, Public Health Policy* (in submission).