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Proceed with caution

Establishing an evidence base for global health access policies

Context Rising costs for medical care pose substantial challenges to health systems. To reduce expenses and to increase access to treatment, individuals in need of care increasingly seek for opportunities for treatment abroad. There is considerable potential for this, as many hospitals in low and middle-income countries world offer high quality care at significantly lower costs. We argue that an evidence-based global health access policy is a necessity to ensure that medical travel improves access and quality of care.

Approach We did an extensive scoping in scientific and grey literature to address the following questions: (1) how many individuals travel, (2) where to and from where do patients travel, (3) what are the risks and safeguards thorough the whole process? Based on the available evidence, a research framework is proposed that would inform effective policy to ensure medical travel genuinely improves access to quality care.

POLICY INSIGHTS | Five key domains requiring an immediate action

- 1 **Develop international quality standards specific for medical travel**
- 2 **Establish relevant legal and economic safeguards**
- 3 **Test the decision-making processes of medical travellers**
- 4 **Ensure emphasis is placed on the importance psychosocial support**
- 5 **Consider viability of medical travel within employer health programmes**

Results Available evidence on medical travel is almost exclusively representative of medical tourists seeking non-essential care. Asian countries are the most popular destinations for individuals travelling for care, with numbers reported as high as 1.6 million travellers per year in India and 1.2 million per year in Thailand. There is a dire lack of oversight or protocol for care abroad, and a major void when it comes to reliable evidence to inform policy.

Recommendations Five key domains were identified which specifically require a stronger evidence base and policy integration. The establishment of an effective policy must address these to reduce risks and capitalise on opportunities. The main challenge for the development of such a framework focuses on generating reliable data that effectively represents appropriate stakeholders, including service providers, patients, insurance companies, carers, and policymakers. Enhanced involvement from these groups would ensure that medical travel is treated as appropriate lever to improving access to care on a global level.

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Further details on this project available in the following:

Ruggeri, K., Zalis, L., Meurice, C., Hilton, I., Ly, T.L., Zupan, Z. & Hinrichs, S. (2015). Evidence on global medical travel. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 93(11).