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eHealth and medical travel

Regulating medical travel agency websites

Context The internet is central to introducing and promoting services of medical travel agencies to medical travellers. Expansion of medical tourism is facilitated through these agencies' websites, which are often the first contact point for the consumer. However, they are often the target of criticism due to absence of standards to ensure that businesses provide accurate and reliable information regarding advertised service.

Approach We examined the information provided by European medical travel agency websites using a modified version of the Health on the Net (HON) code. A content analysis assessed how the medical travel agency websites promote their service, and how they communicate risks, benefits and other issues related to medical travel. 27 websites based in thirteen different European countries were identified and coded using the modified HON tool.

Results The websites provided inconsistent information on services provided, costs, risk, and liability. No single item of the tool was addressed by all websites. No claim on any website was supported by a scientific reference. Only 37% of websites provided information on health risks specific to medical travel. One-third of websites described procedural risks and 14.8% of websites discussed post-operative risks, but only 7.4% of all websites acknowledged the availability of emergency services. No website provided data on actual risk rates. In some instances the actual medical procedure moved to the background and medical travel was glamourised by the website. 51.9% of websites reported that aftercare supports would be arranged in the patient's home country, however the regulation of this provision was unclear, particularly with regard to the delivery of drug therapies not supplied in the home country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Better regulation of medical travel agencies and their websites is vital**
- 2 International minimum standards for medical travel agencies must be developed**
- 3 Information on risk rates, costs, and services should be provided on all websites**
- 4 The provision of aftercare supports must always be adequately regulated**
- 5 All claims on the websites relevant to patient choice should be supported by scientific references and validated by appropriate bodies**

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Further details on this project available in the following:

Maguire, Á., Bussmann, S., Meier zu Köcker, C., Verra, S.E., Giorgi, A.L., Ruggeri, K. Raising concern about the information provided on medical travel agency websites: A place for policy. Health Policy and Technology (in submission).