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Patients without borders

Decision-making for international medical travel

Context The increased access to transportation and information has led to the emergence of more diverse patient choice and new forms of healthcare consumption, such as medical travel. Even though medical travel is increasing, few studies have identified push and pull factors that make a person travel for medical care. The main reasons for seeking medical treatment abroad include access to higher-quality treatment, lower costs, and shorter waiting lists abroad. In order for healthcare providers to effectively attract patients, more knowledge is needed on the mechanisms underlying decision-making of potential travelers from different countries.

Approach We investigated which factors influence individuals' decision-making for or against obtaining medical care abroad, and how these factors interact. The factors analyzed include quality, cost, and waiting time for two procedures varying in invasiveness across twelve different destination countries. The decision-making patterns were examined using a pilot questionnaire distributed via social media. It generated a large amount of data from over 800 participants in 40 countries.

Results Individuals display a surprisingly high willingness to travel for medical care, as 66.9% would agree to travel. Quality of the medical procedure abroad was considered the most important factor, and cost was least important. An interaction between time waiting in the local healthcare system and type of procedure was found, whereby time pressure increased the odds of agreeing to travel for the more invasive procedure only. The odds of travelling to Europe and the USA were by far the highest, although participants indicated that under certain conditions they might be willing to travel to other medical destinations such as Asia.

Recommendations It is crucial that quality standards are upheld in the destination country, as this was considered the most important factor influencing the medical travel decision. Overall, individuals displayed high willingness to travel for care, especially to destinations in Europe and the USA. Medical travel destinations, and especially those in less favoured regions, need to provide quality assurances. Price competition is less likely to result in higher numbers of medical travelers, as cost was the least important factor to travel for care.

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Further details on this project available in the following:

Zhukovsky, P., Ruggeri, K., Garcia-Garzon, E., Haller, E., Plakolm, S., Petrova, D., Mahalingam, V., Meneses, I. G. Medical travel and access to care: Using social media to develop evidence-based global health policy. *Frontiers in Public Health, Public Health Policy* (in submission).