

Travel Assistance and Medical Tourism

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Seniors are taking to the road more than ever before and often medical concerns are a major part of their travel. Sometimes medical concerns are the reason for their travel, a new phenomenon called “medical tourism.” But sometimes, medical concerns are an unfortunate, disruptive, and even physically dangerous part of travel. When senior’s travel plans are interrupted by disease or need for emergency care, that type of medical concern comes under the umbrella of “travel assistance.”

Both travel assistance and medical tourism affect not only those involved in senior care but anyone who has ever traveled. Take, for example, the case of a senior cardiac patient who boards a 5-hour flight only to suffer a heart attack in route. While airlines now are well equipped with medical supplies, they also rely on luck: luck that trained medical professionals are on board the flight to offer expert care. When the call goes out seeking a doctor on board, it’s expected that a physician, if available, will respond with the skill needed to care for almost any emergency. In the meantime, other passengers on the flight are impacted if the flight needs to be diverted because of a medical emergency.

No surprise then that the 6000 Americans turning 65 each day and the growing opportunities for travel are creating burgeoning medical care industries in travel assistance and medical tourism. This growth impacts all Americans



but especially those involved in senior health care.

Medical Tourism

Because of increasing healthcare costs and rising numbers of Americans who are uninsured, the number of people seeking medical at-

tention outside of the country continues to grow. At the other end of the spectrum are those Americans who seek health care not available in the United States and privately pay for such services. Just a decade ago, medical tourism was unheard of, but now it is one

Table 1.
Current Organizations Offering Medical Tourism Services

Med Journeys

Provides multiple procedures (general, cosmetic, dental, and preventive), destinations, hospitals, doctors, all-inclusive packages, and companions
www.medjourneys.com

Med Retreat

American-owned and operated, medical tourism service agency facilitating the healthcare needs of North American health tourism patients seeking all forms of medical travel programs
www.medretreat.com

Medical Nomad

Offers wide range of procedures such as dental, cosmetic, fertility, bariatric, comprehensive medicine and surgery, and ophthalmology; site allows patient to choose provider from a list of JCI- and ISO-accredited hospitals
www.medicalnomad.com

Medical Tourism to China

Featured services include stem cell therapies, orthopedics, plastic surgery, and more.
www.medicaltourismchina.org/MTCWeb/index.htm

ISO = International Standards Organization; JCI = The Joint Commission International

of the fastest growing sectors of the healthcare industry today. Americans travel to other countries to receive invasive surgery, dental care, and cosmetic procedures. Medical tourism has grown because, in part, foreign medical services offer unique, convenient, cost-effective, and time-efficient services. Medical travel is expected to be a \$40-billion business by 2010, with over 780 million patients seeking care outside of their country.¹ It has been estimated that 150,000 to 400,000 Americans traveled abroad for health care in 2006.² AARP reported the number to be 500,000.³

On the same trip in which they receive medical care, medical tourists often tour, vacation, and fully experience the attractions of the countries they are visiting for care. Some of the most traveled destinations for medical health care, catering to foreign patients, are India, Singapore, Hungary, Thailand, South Africa, Dubai, Costa Rica, and Brazil. Thailand is considered the top destination for

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many of these travelers due to Bangkok’s Bumrungrad International Medical Center, which treated an estimated 64,000 Americans in 2006, an 11% increase from 2005.

The Asia Pacific specifically has become a hot spot and major destination for many travelers looking to have procedures done at a low cost because of state-of-the-art facilities in China, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand where more than 15 hospitals have received accreditation from The Joint Commission In-

ternational (JCI), a nonprofit organization. According to the JCI, its mission is “to continuously improve the safety and quality of care in the international community through the provision of education and consultation services and international accreditation.”⁴

Benefits vs. Risks

When traveling to obtain cost-effective and time-efficient health care, consumers need to be aware of the benefits and risks involved.

Benefits

- Lower prices for medical, dental, and cosmetic care
- State-of-the-art hospitals in some countries
- Western-trained physicians and dentists who speak English
- Faster access to doctors than in the US
- Vacation opportunities and post-care rest at relatively low cost
- Shorter wait times for appointments
- Greater international sharing of medical “best practices”

Risks

- Lack of follow-up care by the surgeon if complications occur after returning home
- Little or no legal recourse in cases of negligence
- Opportunities for legal redress “might be very, very different” from those in the US—or even nonexistent
- Risk of poor treatment by under-qualified practitioners or in substandard facilities

Health travel agencies (Table 1) are organizations that provide services ranging from help in finding flights and accommodations to making appointments with physicians and arranging medical procedures and hospital stays.

Travel Assistance

The other sector of the healthcare industry that is being impacted by

Table 2.
Travel Assistance Companies

Accessible Journeys

(Wheelchair specific)

Individual travel, group tours, and cruises

www.disabilitytravel.com/index.html

- Wheelchair and barrier-free vacations
- Personal comforts included
- Continuing education included
- Special themes and interest tours
- Accessible van rentals (with GPS navigation)
- Chauffeur-driven accessible vans and private cars
- Guaranteed accessible hotels
- Daily full breakfast (or half and full board)
- Meet-and-greet services at airports and trains
- Accessible airport and train station transfers; prepurchased foreign rail and air tickets
- Luggage assistance
- English-speaking guides
- Preurchased entertainment tickets
- Travel insurance protection
- Foreign currency travel packs
- Foreign language assistance 24/7
- Personal care attendants
- Travel medical equipment rentals
- Overseas mobile telephone rentals
- Real-time assistance for illness or mishap

Executive Care Services

(Business and leisure travel, medical retreat/recovery, geriatric/dependent)

www.execcareservices.com/services/index.asp

- Individual care from experienced certified nurses
- Accommodations at fine resort
- Prearranged accommodations
- Chauffeur service available to and from surgical site
- Meals prepared by resort staff
- Post-procedural care per physician's instructions
- In-room spa and massage service available with physician's approval (additional cost)



seniors' desire to adventure to distant locales is travel assistance (Table 2). Many Americans, especially those who use respirators or other medical devices on a 24-hour basis, now have the opportunity to benefit from the low cost of care in other countries and to travel and see the world. Some health travel service providers offer 24-hour travel assistance from skilled professionals such as nurses who accompany geriatric patients or wheelchair-dependent individuals on vacation trips. Other agencies offer specialized packages that cater to the specific needs of each individual. For example, Dialysis at Sea (<http://www.dialysisatsea.com/>) is the largest international provider of dialysis services aboard cruise ships.

All Aboard

There are many ways that senior

healthcare providers can take advantage of this growing segment in both medical tourism and travel assistance. On the most basic level practices can be prepared to answer patient questions, even serving as a potential referral site for some of the best overseas care sites. Practices can also position themselves to prepare patients for their journeys or even develop segments of their practice to act as traveling medical personnel to accompany patients on their vacations.

With such a significant demand on the part of seniors for healthcare services both aboard and during travel, it is clear that innovative clinicians will find ways to address the consumer demand. What is yet unknown is whether clinicians will be leading this change or simply be drawn in late in the game to be spectators rather than active participants.

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