

Chapter 80

The Psychology of Medical Tourism

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ABSTRACT

What can clinical psychology contribute to medical tourism? Well, of course, clinicians are a very important part of any form of medical treatment, but psychologists are important because of their training in the mental condition of the patient, an aspect of medicine that is often not valued as highly as that of physical intervention in disease control or accident recovery. And yet, the whole concept of health and wellness (of which medical tourism is increasingly a part) relies heavily on the addition of psychological support in the healing and rehabilitation process. This chapter provides some insights into the processes and value of psychological intervention in the physical and mental wellbeing of patients in the medical system, provides information on the Japanese variants of this, and seeks to extend understanding of the value of this intervention for medical tourists.

INTRODUCTION

What can clinical psychology contribute to medical tourism? Clinicians are a very important part of any form of medical treatment, but psychologists are also important because of their training in the mental condition of the patient, an aspect of medicine that is not valued as highly as that of physical intervention in disease control or accident recovery. And yet, the whole concept of health and wellness, of which medical tourism is increasingly a part, relies heavily on the addition of psychological support in the healing and rehabilitation process. This chapter provides some insights into the processes and value of psychological intervention in the physical and mental wellbeing of the patients in the medical system, provides information on the Japanese variants of this, and seeks to extend understanding of the value of this intervention for medical tourists. In doing so, the chapter covers the following topics:

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1. What qualifications and experience are required to work as a clinical psychologist in Japan? The movement of psychologists in clinical practice, and the ability of clinical psychologists (including in the past) to provide therapy to tourists in the field;
2. The Japanese medical system and its ability to use psychological intervention in the treatment and care of patients (with a view to extending these services to international patients); and
3. An extension of the above to tourism regions: (1) what are the limitations and issues in servicing international tourists; (2) the type of clinical psychologists that can undertake work for tourists; (3) the type that can research tourism for the local community; and (4) how a system of medical tourism based on clinical psychological services might work in practice?

The author lives in a community that has a small foreign resident population, is heavily influenced by an international University, and is a very famous destination for health and wellness therapy based on hot mineral springs (240,000 international tourists and 8 million domestic tourists). Half of the students at the university are foreign (3000), and there are 80+ foreign Faculty from many different countries. As well providing support for these types of foreigners living in Japan (including medical and social support), throughout the country there are increasing services being provided for the influx of foreign tourists by department stores, restaurants, bookstores, and convenience stores in many cities. Gradually, and well behind other countries, Japan is developing a truly international character that is now reflected in day to day living, as well as in seasoned restaurants and a number of exotic landscapes. Signage, brochures and other information sources are also available in many languages in famous tourist cities like Sapporo, Tokyo, Kyoto, Fukuoka, and even locally in Beppu, a small city in the island of Kyushu. All these changes mean that a multicultural society is, at least on the surface, available in many places that may be able to support the medical tourist as well as the 'ordinary' tourist (Mano, 2006; Japan Tourism Agency, 2013).

Are foreigners now commonplace in the hospitals and clinics as a result? Well, no, but if we compare the situation now with that of only a few years ago, there is a definite up surge in their numbers. Historically most patients have been Japanese, but foreigners now come to consult a physician, and if they have no treatment limitations, or language and medical insurance problems, are readily accepted. It is still the case though (as in most countries) that foreigners with limited financial resources, or who are difficult or unusual medical cases, or have cultural or religious differences, cannot easily be provided with health care on a day-to-day basis. On the other hand, private clinics increasingly exist to take up at least part of the required support for this population too. Acceptance is also important in those medical treatment areas that rely on psychological as well as surgical techniques for their success in any community; it is doubly so for medical tourists. In regard to this, there is the general situation that acknowledges that many patients are reassured when told that "you are OK"; indicating that some of the best treatments available to the medical system are *words* from medical people, a care-giver or a clinical psychologist.

A clinical psychologist is not a medical practitioner, nevertheless a number of them work in medical fields. It is important to see that as well as appropriate medical procedures, technical facilities, and an understanding of patient physical conditions, mental support as a bridge to provide patient with health and wellness support should be provided where deemed necessary. The prevention of psychological stress should be paramount. Psychology is useful here because it has historically been focussed on mental weaknesses and problems. While the overall medical problem-solving model (the repair model) focuses on treating ailing or vulnerable parts of the body through medical techniques, trying to repair a condition through clinical psychological means can also be important. Clinical psychology also focuses on the

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