


Chapter 9


Virtual Consultations for Mental Health Support in Medical Tourism: Insights From an Interview- Based Study

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ABSTRACT

The growing global demand for medical tourism has highlighted the importance of addressing not only physical health but also psychological well-being. Medical tourists often experience stress, anxiety, and cultural disorientation while navigating treatment in unfamiliar settings. This study explores the role of virtual consultations in providing mental health support to medical tourists. Using a qualitative, interview-based research design, insights were gathered from medical tourists, healthcare providers, and mental health professionals to understand perceptions, benefits, and challenges of virtual mental health services. Findings indicate that virtual consultations enhance accessibility, offer continuity of care across borders, and reduce stigma associated with seeking support in host destinations. However, challenges such as technological barriers, cultural sensitivity, and regulatory discrepancies persist.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-6881-8.ch009

1. INTRODUCTION

The globalization of healthcare has accelerated the growth of medical tourism, attracting millions of patients who travel across borders seeking affordable, high-quality medical treatment. While this phenomenon has traditionally emphasized physical health and cost advantages, increasing attention is being drawn to the psychological challenges faced by medical tourists, including anxiety, uncertainty, cultural dislocation, and post-treatment emotional stress (Connell & Yeoh, 2022; Hanefeld et al., 2020). The integration of virtual consultations particularly for mental health support—has emerged as a promising approach to bridge emotional care gaps in transnational healthcare journeys (Gajarawala & Pelkowski, 2021). Advances in telepsychiatry and digital mental health platforms allow patients to access psychological counseling remotely, offering continuity of care before, during, and after treatment abroad (Abdelmalek et al., 2022). These virtual modalities have proven effective in reducing stigma, enhancing accessibility, and promoting cross-cultural communication, particularly among patients reluctant to seek face-to-face therapy in unfamiliar environments (Smith et al., 2023). However, challenges remain ranging from technological limitations and digital literacy disparities to ethical and legal ambiguities concerning cross-border telemedicine regulation (Choudhury et al., 2020; Turner, 2023). Furthermore, cultural sensitivity is critical, as perceptions of mental health and help-seeking behavior vary widely across societies (Nguyen et al., 2022). The convergence of medical tourism and virtual mental health care thus demands an interdisciplinary perspective, blending insights from global health, psychology, and technology studies to ensure patient well-being beyond physical recovery (Adams et al., 2021)

In recent decades, medical tourism has emerged as a prominent dimension of global healthcare mobility, with millions of patients crossing borders each year in pursuit of specialized treatments, lower costs, and high-quality care (Connell, 2013; Hanefeld et al., 2015). While this transnational movement for medical purposes has traditionally focused on physical health outcomes and clinical efficiency, the psychological dimensions of the medical tourism experience have often remained overlooked. Medical tourists frequently encounter unique emotional and cultural challenges including anxiety, isolation, uncertainty, and adjustment difficulties that can significantly affect both their treatment experiences and overall recovery (Crooks et al., 2017). In this context, the integration of mental health support into the medical tourism framework has become increasingly essential. Global healthcare systems are recognizing that physical recovery cannot be separated from emotional well-being, particularly when patients must navigate unfamiliar environments and healthcare practices. Yet, many destination countries continue to prioritize infrastructure and

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