

Chapter 15

Sun, Surgery and Cyberspace: The Role of the Internet in the Rise of Medical Tourism

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, increasing attention has been paid by the media and the tourist industry to what has become known as ‘medical tourism’ sometimes also called ‘health’ or ‘wellness’ tourism. Before around 2000, these were hardly mentioned by the media at all. However, in one sense, medical tourism has a long history, as some of the information sites on the Internet are eager to point out. People have been travelling in search of medical treatment for millennia, whether in order to visit hot springs as in Poland, Hungary or Japan. Why this sudden interest? In this Chapter I argue that it is due to a combination of factors: the changing distribution of medical services and technologies, the growth of interest among both local medical practitioners in different parts of the world and travel agents, the clever packaging of tourism and medical services as a single product, and the availability of the Internet both to assemble and to disseminate information on these new products. The chapter covers the implications of these cases for the future of medical tourism, and its relations both with the medical and tourism industries.

INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF MEDICAL TOURISM

In the last few years, increasing attention has been paid by the media and the tourist industry to what has become known as “medical tourism” sometimes also called ‘health’ or ‘wellness’ tourism. Before around 2000, these were hardly mentioned by the

media at all, as a search of the LexisNexis database of major world sources shows (Table 1). According to LexisNexis, the number of news items from major news agencies and newspapers which mentioned it rose from zero around 1990, to over 2000 at present, and most of this increase has occurred since 2003.

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Table 1. Number of references to “medical tourism” in major English language news sources, 1992-2008

Year	Number
1992	8
1993	14
1994	26
1995	14
1996	12
1997	35
1998	103
1999	26
2000	49
2001	95
2002	151
2003	234
2004	548
2005	737
2006	1349
2007	2335
2008 (January-August)	1850

Source: LexisNexis, Major English Language News Sources (Retrieved 30 August 2008).

order to visit hot springs as in Poland, Hungary or Japan (Kapczynski & Szromek, 2008; Geoghegan, 2003; Clark, 1994), bathe in or drink the local waters with supposed healing properties as in Bath (Sanati, 2003, Haley et al. 2005), visit shrines or the tombs of saints as in Catholic Europe (Gesler, 1996), or seek out local healers with regional or international reputations, as in contemporary Africa (Probst, 1999). But however these earlier forms of medical tourism are described, it does appear that in recent years the industry has boomed to a quite unprecedented extent, and has been recognized as a distinctive sector within both the tourism and medical industries.

Why this sudden interest? In this paper, I argue that it is due to a combination of factors: the changing distribution of medical services and technologies, the growth of interest among both local medical practitioners in different parts of the world and travel agents, the clever packaging

of tourism and medical services as a single product, and the availability of the Internet both to assemble and to disseminate information on these new products. Indeed, without the Internet, the industry could probably not have taken off at all. The kinds of instant research into medical procedures and their relative prices in different parts of the world would have been impossible for most people in the pre-Internet era when they would have been reliant on newspaper archives, libraries and conventional telephone and postal services for assembling this kind of information. Anything based on scholarly research is by definition several years out of date, allowing for the cycle of research, writing and publication. Meanwhile in the world of medical tourism, whole industries can mushroom in the time it takes to get the average article published in a conventional journal. The Internet has short-circuited the delay in compiling information, allowing this new industry to take

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