

Ethical Considerations of Medical Tourism: A Review Based on the Four Principles of Medical Ethics: A Narrative Review Article

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Abstract

Introduction: Medical tourism has grown significantly in recent years, attracting substantial government investment due to its potential economic benefits. However, this emphasis on financial gains risks overshadowing critical ethical issues.

Methods: This manuscript presents a narrative review of the literature. Articles in English related to ethical issues in medical tourism were selected. Although the search for sources was not limited by date, older sources deemed less relevant were excluded.

Results: Medical tourism can seriously challenge patient autonomy and decision-making, potentially undermining informed consent. In certain instances, it may jeopardize patients' interests and expose them to harm. Without careful policymaking, health equity may be compromised. Ethical review of medical tourism regulations should be a priority for health systems, ensuring that benefits from the tourism industry do not diminish its importance.

Conclusion: Healthcare professionals and policymakers should be well-versed in the ethical concerns associated with medical tourism, not solely focused on its development. Comprehensive ethical audits of strategies should be conducted as part of planning for the industry's expansion. This article examines the ethical dimensions of medical tourism through the lens of the four principles of medical ethics.

Keywords: Ethical Considerations, Medical Tourism, Medical Travel, Justice in Health, Respect for Patient Autonomy.

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Introduction

Medical tourism is defined as travelling to other countries to receive medical care and services ¹, has become a significant industry in recent years. Many countries embrace it for its potential economic advantages ². Typically, travel occurs from countries with high healthcare costs to those with lower costs. These trips often involve procedures such as fertility treatments, organ transplants, cosmetic surgeries, and dental services ³, and may even extend to elective termination of life in countries where it is legal ⁴. The increase in medical tourism boosts the economies of destination countries by increasing demand for accommodation, transportation, and other related services ⁵. Health tourism is now recognized as a sector with considerable potential, prompting governments to invest heavily in its development⁶. However, this strong focus on economic

potential can overshadow numerous ethical issues. In addition to fostering the development of this industry, healthcare professionals and government health systems must also be aware of ethical concerns. Medical tourism can create serious challenges to patients' autonomy and decision-making power, and decision-making power and undermine their informed consent, in some cases, it may jeopardize patients' interests and expose them to harm and if proper policymaking for medical tourism is not done carefully, health equity will be compromised. The need for ethical review of medical tourism regulations should always be a priority for the health system, and the benefits derived from the tourism industry should not diminish its importance. Healthcare professionals and policymakers should not only focus on the development of industry, but as part of their planning, they should conduct an ethical

audit of their programs. The core mission of the healthcare system is to protect and prioritize patient well-being, and this critical concern must not be compromised in the pursuit of economic gains. The main of this article is to examine the ethical issues arising in medical tourism, based on the four principles of medical ethics proposed by Beauchamp and Childress ⁷. This approach offers an analytical framework and a shared ethical vocabulary. While these principles do not provide rigid rules, they can guide doctors and other healthcare workers in their decision-making when reflecting on ethical dilemmas in their practice ⁸.

Methodology

This manuscript is a narrative review of literature, using sources identified through internet searches and existing publications in English. The search terms included “medical tourism,” “medical travel,” “justice in health,” “respect for patient autonomy,” “beneficence in healthcare,” and “non-maleficence in healthcare.” The four principles of medical ethics as articulated by Beauchamp and Childress served as the central framework for examining the prevalent issue of medical tourism from an ethical perspective.

Included criteria: Articles related to ethical issues of medical tourism and in English were selected and included in the study and it was attempted to use newer sources in the study.

Excluded criteria: Although no time limitation was applied to the search, sources that were too old were excluded from the study.

Findings:

This section addresses the ethical risks of medical tourism and attempts to identify and analyze these risks using the four principles of medical ethics. (Table 1)

The first ethical principle: is respect for Individual Autonomy

Ethical considerations related to respecting patient autonomy include maintaining confidentiality and privacy, obtaining proper informed consent, and ensuring appropriate conduct in doctor-patient relationships. Although medical tourism inherently reflects patients' right to choose healthcare services in a preferred country, advertising medical services akin to marketing goods can undermine patients' decision-making capacity. This can occur through the provision of sensationalized or inaccurate information, thereby compromising genuinely informed and free consent. If patients are overwhelmed by options and confused in selecting a destination for care, this significantly compromises their autonomy. Patients often rely on online sources, which may be incomplete

and skewed by the destination country's marketing efforts, without fully understanding the potential treatment complications or risks. As a result, the consent they provide is not fully valid ⁹. Another point to consider is that medical tourists often come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, making it necessary to give additional thought to understanding their unique preferences and needs during the decision-making process. In the context of effective patient communication, doctors should also ensure that differences in race, skin colour, and culture do not result in discriminatory treatment ¹⁰. Honesty and integrity with patients, as well as maintaining their confidentiality and privacy, are also issues that doctors must uphold in medical tourism to at least the same standard as they would for patients in their own country. However, they should consider adhering to these principles as even more important for guest patients.

The second and third ethical principles: Benefiting the Patient and Not Harming the Patient (Beneficence and Non-maleficence)

The main intention of medical travel is to receive health services, which at first glance appears to be beneficial to patients, especially since the costs incurred are generally lower compared to those in their home countries. This also creates apparent economic savings ¹¹. However, several emerging issues need attention. The quality of care and health services varies between countries, which can pose risks for patients. There are also concerns regarding the continuity of care after patients return to their home countries ¹². Patients may return home facing complications from the treatment or experiencing the consequences of a medical error. In such cases, it may be difficult to pursue accountability and determine liability for medical errors.

During their treatment in the destination country, patients may experience anxiety due to language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, and separation from their loved ones ¹³.

Long-distance air travel has also been reported to increase the risk of pulmonary embolism and venous thrombosis after surgery ^{14, 15}. Additionally, there is the potential for contracting infectious diseases and transmitting antibiotic-resistant infections back to the tourist's country of origin ¹⁶. Furthermore, inadequate treatment documentation provided to patients in the destination country can also present challenges after their return.

Fourth Ethical Principle: Justice in Health

Establishing fairness and equity in healthcare services within society is one of the four essential principles of medical ethics. This requires that the distribution of health resources and facilities be based on justice. Despite its economic benefits for countries, medical tourism raises concerns related to justice in health ¹⁷.

For example, access to health services for the poor in destination countries is often a significant challenge ¹⁸. Does everyone, particularly the disadvantaged, have sufficient access to health resources in the destination country, and to the same extent as health tourists? There is a concern that the best facilities and resources are directed towards centres that cater to health tourists and that providing expensive services to them will commoditize health services and gradually make them inaccessible to disadvantaged populations ¹⁹.

The shift of higher-quality medical services and skilled medical personnel from public to private hospitals ²⁰ can lead to an increase in the cost of health services for local patients and, generally, higher long-term healthcare costs. The cost of training personnel who provide services to tourists is typically funded by the public budget of the destination country. While the public sector bears the costs of specialist training, the private sector, particularly in medical tourism, will reap the benefits, contradicting the principle of justice in health. This can lead doctors and medical staff to prioritize tourists, potentially undermining their sense of social responsibility ²¹. This conflict of interests jeopardizes the medical profession's ethical code, which requires professionals to prioritize patients' best interests, a critical distinction between a professional and a mere employee.

Medical tourism can create a double standard in medical care between the poor and the wealthy and between local and foreign patients ²². This is morally troubling, since specialized and optimal services may be reserved for foreign tourists, while the poor and disadvantaged receive fewer and less specialized services. This disparity could also increase between cities and rural areas, as health systems often establish most of their facilities in urban areas ²³.

Violating laws is also a matter of injustice, and health tourism sometimes opens the door for these violations. For example, some procedures are illegal in one country (like fertilization with anonymous gametes, fertilization for homosexuals, transgenders, and single mothers, or illegal abortions), but health tourists can access these services in another country where they are not illegal ²⁴.

Table 1. Ethical challenges in health tourism based on medical ethics principles

Ethical Principles	Ethical challenges in health tourism
Respecting patient autonomy	Insufficient and incorrect information Possibility of discriminatory behaviour towards patients due to cultural-racial differences Journalistic advertising
Benefiting and not harming the patient	Lack of commitment by the country of origin to care after return AND Lack of responsibility by the country of origin for medical Anxiety due to cultural differences in the destination Country Possibility of resistant infections in the destination country and transmission to the country of origin Possibility of venous thrombosis due to air travel
Justice in health	Access to health services for poor people in destination countries Double standards in receiving health services among the poor and the rich, and among locals and foreigners Violation of prohibitions of the country of origin in the destination country (transgenderism, gamete donation, illegal abortion, homosexual insemination)

Conclusion

It is essential to consider the ethical dimensions of medical tourism as a growing industry. Enhancing treatment and healthcare services should remain a primary concern, and the patient's well-being should be at the forefront of all health policymakers' minds. The temptation to achieve better economic conditions should not compromise the importance and centrality of patient care.

While medical tourism can offer economic advantages to low-income countries, it also creates various ethical challenges. The expansion of health tourism, also referred to as the health tourism industry, could make these ethical challenges more pronounced. Although tourism is often seen as a strategy to alleviate poverty in low-income countries and improve global health ^{25,26}, it can at times work against its stated goals ²⁷. The right to health is a basic human right, and policymakers should not discriminate in ensuring this right. This is because the industry's intent appears less altruistic and more aimed at serving the interests of the affluent over the disadvantaged ²⁸. Patients' trust in the medical community depends on the belief that doctors will prioritize their best interests, and the self-regulation of the medical profession increases the responsibility of

the medical community and the health system^{29,30}. Health policymakers should ensure that policies prioritize respect for autonomy, beneficence, and justice, while at the same time utilizing the benefits of health tourism³¹. They are usually physicians and should also stand up to unrealistic medical tourism advertising that does not take into account the real interests of patients. Care must be taken to ensure that the benefits of health tourism are accessible to all members of society and that resources are used to provide medical services to disadvantaged populations, rather than only benefiting the wealthy. Policymakers should also take care to ensure that, alongside profiting from health tourism, immoralities and violations such as illegal organ trafficking, the transmission of viral and parasitic infections, and the proliferation of inappropriate cultural practices do not spread³².

Highlights

What Is Already Known?

Health tourism, which has been accepted as an industry in the economies of countries, can be considered a threat to medical ethics, in addition to the benefits it brings to nations. Some studies have addressed the ethical problems of health tourism, but so far these issues have not been examined within the framework of medical ethics.

What Does This Study Add?

his approach offers an analytical framework and a shared ethical vocabulary. While these principles do not provide rigid rules, they can guide doctors and other healthcare workers in their decision-making when reflecting on ethical dilemmas in their practice

Authors' Contributions

The first author prepared the initial draft of the article, and the second author approved and edited the draft.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest in this study

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All authors agree to the publication of the article.

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The authors did not use artificial intelligence anywhere in the article.

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