

“Medical tourism” refers to patients traveling abroad for the purpose of obtaining non-emergency health care. “Dental tourism” is a subset of “medical tourism,” and is growing in popularity as an alternative for patient care. In discussions on the issue, the Board of Directors of the American Dental Association has expressed the view that dental tourism is a symptom of decreased access to dental care, the increasing cost shift of health care by employer-sponsored group dental plans to the patient, and the “flattening” of the world in terms of the rise of a truly global economy and the ease of travel to foreign nations. A key concern is the consistency of the quality of care provided in other countries.

Background

In a report on health care globalization prepared for the American Dental Association, it was noted that patients have sought health care outside their native countries for many years, so in this sense, “medical tourism” is nothing new. The report observed, “As the quality of health care improved in many areas of the world – a good thing – some patients from the United States are now traveling abroad to seek ‘expensive’ health care of acceptable quality at a lower cost. This ‘medical tourism’ by Americans seeking ‘first world medical care at a third world price,’ involves a small number of people now, but has the potential to expand.” Increasingly, the travel agent industry is packaging so-called “dental holidays” that combine elective care with vacation tours of a foreign country.

Reva Health Network is an online resource and search engine promoting medical tourism. Reva estimates that over 2.5 million people a year, from all over the world, search the Internet for information about dental treatment abroad. Reva receives an estimated 600 inquiries a week on dental tourism alone. Reva-gathered data shows that patients opting for care outside their home countries seek the following procedures: implants (27%), veneers (20%), crowns (16%), teeth whitening (11%), bridges (9%), braces (6%), all other treatment (11%).

The favored destinations for dental tourists are: Hungary (31%), Mexico (18%), Poland (17%), Thailand (9%), Turkey (7%), Spain (5%), other countries (13%).

Questions for Patients’ Consideration

Patients considering foreign travel to receive dental care should include the following considerations in their decision:

Is your general oral health and condition of teeth sound?

While one may be planning on traveling outside the U.S. to acquire an implant or crown restoration, existing decay, broken fillings, and other dental problems and in-process dental treatment should be completed before traveling. A foreign dentist might be willing to address conditions other than the one for which the patient is seeking treatment, but additional care which may be routinely covered at home by one’s own dental plan may not be covered if provided overseas, or won’t be covered as extensively, as they would be at home.

How does your plan cover “out of network” care? A dental plan may pay for a portion of care performed by a foreign dentist, or it may not. For a dental plan that allows its enrollees to obtain care from “out of network providers,” does it include coverage for treatment performed outside the United States? Also, importantly, does your dental plan cover “re-dos” if something goes wrong or a procedure performed outside the U.S. needs to be redone?

What are the risks of the procedure being sought overseas?

The appeal of “dental tourism” is the ability to receive treatment that may be expensive in the U.S. for a much reduced cost in another nation. Consequently, most who seek dental care overseas are looking for care that may also be more complicated. What risks are associated with such complex care, and are you prepared to respond to such risks if realized in a foreign country?

What are your rights in receiving care overseas? What recourse will you have in terms of appeal, the possibility of corrective care, or legal action, if the treatment received is unacceptable, or there are complications after treatment? Is there a complaint process or a method of getting a refund if you are not satisfied with your treatment? While a dental benefit plan may pay a portion of the care obtained overseas, can your plan intercede on your behalf with the foreign dentist if the care rendered is unsatisfactory? What are your rights in the home country of the dentist to pursue civil action through a court for any negligence on the part of the dentist? In such case, will you need to retain a foreign attorney?

What health and safety procedures are followed by the foreign dental practice? Dentists in the United States must follow stringent infection control and safety standards. Use of rubber or vinyl gloves, face masks, the sterilization of instruments and decontamination of surfaces, dentists’ vaccinations against hepatitis B, are standard required practices of dental offices in the United States.



While such basic practices are recognized as standard throughout most of the world, what are the specific infection controls and safety procedures followed in the nation you are intending to travel to for dental care? What regulatory agencies in the foreign country oversee health and safety standards? Also, patients should review the [International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers](#) for alerts about current public health concerns in foreign countries before making a commitment to travel overseas for care.

What are the real costs of care through “dental tourism”?

While dental tourism has grown because of the promise of procuring less expensive treatment outside the United States, patients need to recognize that the total cost of sought-for care includes the cost of travel, time commitment, and the potential cost of re-treatment back in the U.S. if such is necessary. Savings expected by traveling to another nation to receive dental treatment may be illusory.

What should I ask the foreign dentist before agreeing to treatment?

- Will any complications be dealt with free of charge?
- Is the work guaranteed over a period of time (e.g., crown or bridge work guaranteed for up to five years)?
- What professional accreditation does the dentist have, and is he/she a member of any professional organizations?
- How will follow-up visits be dealt with (some foreign dentists have offices or partnerships with international dentists)?
- Does he/she have malpractice insurance?
- Can he/she give references?
- How many years has the dentist been in practice?
- What anesthetic will be used?
- How soon after the treatment will you be able to travel home?