



# What is Medical Tourism?

A practical  
understanding of

- Medical Tourism
- Medical Travel
- Wellness Tourism
- Wellness Travel
- Health Tourism and
- Health Travel

Julie W. Munro

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This series, *Best Practices in Medical Tourism*,  
is published by MTQUA  
Medical Travel Quality Alliance  
[www.mtqua.org](http://www.mtqua.org)

The ***Best Practices in Medical Tourism*** publications from the Medical Travel Quality Alliance are written to educate and inform health care and service providers in the medical tourism “supply chain,” in order to focus attention on quality and safety practices in the treatment and care management of traveling international patients.

Titles in the series include

- **Care and Management of Traveling International Patients (#1)**
- **GREAT EVERY TIME: Delivering Excellent Patient Experience By Managing Critical Touchpoints In Medical Tourism (#2)**
- **What is Medical Tourism? (#3)**
- **Website and Internet Best Practices in Medical Tourism (#4)**

*Why now? Why “What is Medical Tourism?”*

*At Medical Travel Quality Alliance, we have noted that the question “What is medical tourism?” seems to be asked with increasing frequency, especially by newcomers to the medical tourism industry. The wide variety of answers that do exist are too narrow, too general, or confusing, and leave many other questions unanswered.*

*The definitions for medical travel and medical tourism have become, over time, commonly used in the industry.*

*We hope these working definitions and explanations of medical tourism, medical travel, wellness tourism, wellness travel and health tourism may help medical tourism participants, consumers, journalists and medical tourism industry “outsiders” to better understand the nature of medical tourism.*

*MTQUA has used these definitions internally since 2009 to help guide and inform our own work.*

*You are welcome to use these definitions and descriptions on your websites and in your publications. When quoting this document, please attribute the text appropriately. For reprint of full document, please [request reprint permission](#).*



# What Is Medical Tourism?

A practical understanding of medical  
tourism and medical travel,  
wellness travel and health tourism

by Julie W. Munro

## ***Best Practices in Medical Tourism***

*MTQUA welcomes submissions from experienced health care and medical  
tourism professionals for publication in this series.*

*Please submit your proposal or your document by email to  
[caroline@mtqua.org](mailto:caroline@mtqua.org).*

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## WHAT IS MEDICAL TOURISM?

*Medical tourism* is the business of providing all services to people traveling to another country who intend to obtain medical treatment in that country.

## WHAT IS MEDICAL TRAVEL?

*Medical travel* describes the act of patients traveling from their home country to another for the purpose of obtaining medical diagnosis, treatment or care in that country that is as good or better than they would have received at home, and the act of health care professionals providing medical or health-related treatment, services and support for the purpose of providing an outcome that is as good or better than what the patient might have received at home.

The “success” (i.e. the economic value) of *medical travel* depends on the outcome a patient receives, which depends on the quality of treatment a patient gets along with other support services rendered.

Without good outcomes, there can be no *medical travel*.

## WHAT IS WELLNESS TOURISM?

*Wellness tourism* is the business of providing all services to people traveling to another country for the purpose of participating in a wellness-related activity in that country.

## WHAT IS WELLNESS TRAVEL?

*Wellness travel* is the act of traveling for the purpose of improving or maintaining one's health or well-being through physical, emotional, or spiritual activities.

*Wellness travel* may include visits to hospitals, clinics, or doctors for certain health-related reasons not considered as *medical travel*.

*Wellness travel* is not dependent to the same degree on quality and safety of outcomes as is *medical travel*. There may not need to be a firm distinction between *wellness tourism* and *wellness travel* as there is between *medical tourism* and *medical travel*.

## WHAT IS *HEALTH TOURISM*?

*Health tourism* is the business of providing all services to people traveling to enhance their personal sense of well-being and quality of life.

It includes a wide variety of physical and spiritual health-related purposes of travel such as wellness, medical, adventure, culinary, sports, volunteerism, etc.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

***Medical tourism* describes the act of people making health choices and accessing health treatments by traveling across national borders.**

What is *medical tourism*? Depending on who is asking, the answer can reflect an interest in trade in goods and services, destination popularity, a health care service, or a personal health choice.

This commonly found definition of *medical tourism*, while useful to policy makers, economists and planners, is of very little help to patients.

Medical tourism is the travel of people to another country for the purpose of obtaining medical treatment in that country.

This definition does not support an understanding or provide guidance for individuals who are travel out of their own countries seeking treatment or procedure to alleviate pain or suffering.

Likewise, claiming that *medical tourism* is also known as *medical travel*, *health tourism*, *global healthcare*, *surgical tourism*, or *wellness tourism* is plain wrong. One can claim it, but that doesn't make it true.

In the media, the term *medical tourism* has come to embrace all facets of consumers seeking treatment, improvement or change through medical or wellness



practices – provided they cross an international border to do so... or not.

Yes, it's confusing.

On the one hand, *medical tourism* is a popular, consumer-driven internet search term. To find information about medical treatment abroad, consumers most often search the term *medical tourism* when looking for health care choices open to them.

On the other, government tourism organizations need to count numbers – how many are going, how much they are spending, are they spending more than last year – the bigger, the better. If the numbers do not get bigger, if there's no growth, especially if the country next door has more visitors, they worry – and they spend more money.

Government planners, economists and academics want data on population movements and the value they bring or leave in their wake. They too need to count and put an economic value on the movement of people and growth of business.

For medical professionals and health care providers, for insurers, employers and patients, it is a matter of giving value to life, death, health and quality of life.

What truly matters to them is how to create a safer and better treatment and care environment, how to give international traveling patients what they really want – a smooth passage from sickness to health. Success comes one by one, patient by patient, not in the aggregate.

Economic definitions and “big data” are not sufficient or useful for those “in the trenches” who provide the goods and services for medical travelers.

Medical professionals, health care providers, and medical travel service companies need a useful and practical definition that guides them in caring for traveling international patients.

They need to know how to give value to life, death and quality of life for patients who travel to them for care.

All work of the Medical Travel Quality Alliance is dedicated to improving the safety, security, and quality of outcomes for all traveling international patients.

MTQUA Medical Tourism Certification is focused on the non-clinical elements of patient care that support and improve patient outcomes.

MTQUA Quality Care™ Accreditation is directed at specific clinical and non-clinical aspects of patient care critical to good outcomes.

## 2. WHY DOES IT MATTER?

**Should it matter that there is no agreed upon definition or common understanding of *medical tourism*?**

Questions such as “How are medical tourists to be counted?” or “Should medical travelers be counted instead of – or separate from – medical tourists?” are hard to answer when there is no common understanding or description of *medical tourism*.

Without a common definition, counting medical tourists is like collecting information about the transportation industry by counting the bicycle, car and horse cart as passenger vehicles.

Resulting data is poor and unreliable, and affects the quality of academic research, media reports, government policies and business plans.

Many countries that receive medical travelers are newly developed or developing economies.

Accurate data is essential for government and health care leaders so as not to misallocate scarce or expensive resources.

Accurate data on care and outcomes for medical travelers can make or break a single hospital's or clinic's medical tourism program.

Misunderstandings of the gravest sort can occur when policy makers, researchers and analysts are unclear about what they are measuring, and measure different sets of data, confusing medical tourism with wellness tourism, as happened in a Visa report.

In 2016, the credit card company Visa erroneously published as “*medical tourism facts*” that *medical tourism* was a US\$ 439 billion industry.

Immediately this was touted by some in the industry as remarkable unexpected growth.

Medical tourism facts	Medical tourism Influences	
+25 percent growth per year	Higher quality care and services	Reduced cost of cross-border medical treatment
\$439 billion current market		
11 million medical tourists annually	Medical treatment combined with attractive destinations	Treatments and medications not approved or available in home country
3-4 percent of world's population travel internationally for treatment		

This wrong data spread quickly across the internet, and spawned many “news” reports.

MTQUA spotted the error and asked Visa to review the report. Visa agreed it had made a mistake and issued a correction, as follows:

Visa’s recent study - Mapping the Future of Global Travel and Tourism – included a figure that estimated the size of the medical



## ONLINE SPEED: 60% of Google search top 5 pages carry wrong "fact" for medical tourism industry.

Medical Tourism Industry Valued at \$439B; Poised for 25% Year-Over ...  
[www.omegawire.com/.../medical-tourism-industry-valued-at-439b-poised-for-25-vea-](http://www.omegawire.com/.../medical-tourism-industry-valued-at-439b-poised-for-25-vea-)

Jul 25, 2016 - ... the Medical Tourism industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a projected growth rate of up to 25% year-over-year for the ...

Is the medical tourism industry really worth \$439 billion | IMTJ

<https://www.imtj.com/blog/medical-tourism-industry-worth-439-billion-facts/>

Jul 26, 2016 - Fact or fiction? The latest claims published by the US based Medical Tourism Association (MTA). Does their latest claim hold any truth?

The medical tourism industry is worth \$439 billion! Oh really? | Keith ...  
<https://www.linkedin.com/.../medical-tourism-industry-worth-439-billion-oh-really-ke->

Jul 26, 2016 - Back in September last year, I wrote a post entitled, "The MTA... where ...  
<https://www.facebook.com/medicaltourismassociation/>

Medical Tourism Association | Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/medicaltourismassociation/>

Medical Tourism Association, West Palm Beach, FL ... and Oxford Economics, the industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a ...

Medical Tourism Association - YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/user/medicaltourism1>

The Medical Tourism Association is a Global Non-profit association for the ... the industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a ...

Medical tourism on Flipboard | Tourism, Bariatric surgery

<https://flipboard.com/topic/medicaltourism>

Check out the Medical tourism topic on Flipboard, the one place for all your ... the industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a ...

Medical Tourism Association Newsletters - Webcast: \$43

[https://freshoiceddeals.com/medicaltourismassociation\\_/webcast-43](https://freshoiceddeals.com/medicaltourismassociation_/webcast-43)

Aug 12, 2016 - In a just released report issued by VISA and Oxford Economics, the industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with ...

Tornos News | Medical tourism industry valued at \$439 b

[www.tornosnews.gr/.../17373-medical-tourism-industry-valued-at-439b-](http://www.tornosnews.gr/.../17373-medical-tourism-industry-valued-at-439b-)

Jul 27, 2016 - The global medical tourism industry is set to boom in the coming year, forecasting an annual growth rate of up to 25% over ...

Industry News - International Travel Week Abu Dhabi

[itwabudhabi.com/news.html](http://itwabudhabi.com/news.html)

Medical Tourism Industry Valued At \$439B; Poised For 25% Year-Over-Year Growth  
Tourism industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, ...

Corporate Wellness Magazine Health News: Medical To  
[www.corporatewellnessmagazine.com/news-insights/medical-tourism-](http://www.corporatewellnessmagazine.com/news-insights/medical-tourism-)

A recent study from VISA and Oxford Economic, Mapping the Future of Global Travel  
the medical tourism industry at USD 439 billion with ...

Medical tourism industry valued at \$439B; Poised for 25

[www.travelindustrywire.com/.../medical-tourism-industry-valued-at-439b-](http://www.travelindustrywire.com/.../medical-tourism-industry-valued-at-439b-)

Jul 27, 2016 - In a just released report issued by VISA and Oxford Economics, the industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with ...

Travel News :: Travel Industry Wire

[www.travelindustrywire.com/HNR-index.html](http://www.travelindustrywire.com/HNR-index.html)

Medical Tourism Industry Poised for 25% Year-Over-Year Growth by 2025 ... the M...  
was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a ...

Medical Procedures | Medical Travel / Medical Tourism

[medicaltravelinfo.net/medicaltourism/medical-procedures/](http://medicaltravelinfo.net/medicaltourism/medical-procedures/)

These are all members of the Medical Tourism Association "MTA", a key ... the Me...  
was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a ...

OysterMed Blog - "Medical Travel Simplified"

[oystermedblog.com/wp/](http://oystermedblog.com/wp/)

Jul 31, 2016 - "What Is The Real Value Of The Medical Tourism Industry" ... Medical...  
value had ballooned to USD 439 billion and poised with ...

Medical Tourism on the Rise | OrangeSmile.com

[www.orangesmile.com/travelguide/hotel\\_business\\_news/2163.htm](http://www.orangesmile.com/travelguide/hotel_business_news/2163.htm)

Aug 2, 2016 - The medical tourism industry has become one of fastest developing ...  
Currently, it is valued at US\$439 billion, and expected ...

2016 Community Events - Pillar Hotels & Resorts

[pillarhotels.com/community-events-2016.html](http://pillarhotels.com/community-events-2016.html)

Aug 4, 2016 - The Medical Tourism industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion ...  
growth rate of up to 25% year-over-year for the next ...

Breakfast Briefing - The latest news in UK and Globally

[www.epmagazine.co.uk/ep.../breakfast-briefing-the-latest-news-in-uk-and-globally-1...](http://www.epmagazine.co.uk/ep.../breakfast-briefing-the-latest-news-in-uk-and-globally-1...)

Jul 27, 2016 - Medical tourism industry valued at \$439 billion ... the medical tourism industry was valued  
at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a projected ...

Chryssa Bloukou on Twitter: "#Medical #tourism industry valued at ...

[https://twitter.com/Serangeum\\_spa/status/759299813108244480](https://twitter.com/Serangeum_spa/status/759299813108244480)

Jul 30, 2016 - #Medical #tourism industry valued at \$439 billion <http://ehotelier.com/global/2016/07/26/medical-tourism-industry-valued-439-billion/>

Suzanne Schmitt (VP For Family Engagement At Fidelite Investments)  
[media.wrko.com/.../medical-tourism-industry-valued-at-439b-poised-for-25-vea-](http://media.wrko.com/.../medical-tourism-industry-valued-at-439b-poised-for-25-vea-)

2 days ago - ... the Medical Tourism industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a projected growth rate of up to 25% year-over-year for the ...

Medical Tourism: \$439 billion and growing! | TravelGumbo

[www.travelgumbo.com/blog/medical-tourism-439-billion-and-growing](http://www.travelgumbo.com/blog/medical-tourism-439-billion-and-growing)

Aug 12, 2016 - Could this be the hot new vacation trend, pushing past cruises and guided tours? A study  
sponsored by Visa and Oxford Economics says it's ...

PDF | August 2, 2016 - Arizona Office of Tourism - AZ.gov

<https://tourism.az.gov/sites/.../Tourism%20Tuesday%20Issue%2031%20080216.pdf>

at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a projected growth rate of up to 25% ... In its just-released 2016  
report, industry-leading journal, Medical Tourism Index™

Medical Industry Tourism Valued At \$439B - Mobile Phone

[mobile.berandalan.com/news/Medical-Industry-Tourism-Valued-at-\\$439B/](http://mobile.berandalan.com/news/Medical-Industry-Tourism-Valued-at-$439B/)

The global medical tourism industry is set to boom in the coming years, with ... medical-tourism-  
industry-valued-at-439-billion-poised-for-25-annual-growth.html

Medical Tourism Industry Valued at \$439B; Poised for 25% Year-Over ...

[www.dzhintl.com/news-research-item.php?id=PR%20NewsWire%201753583...0](http://www.dzhintl.com/news-research-item.php?id=PR%20NewsWire%201753583...0)

Jul 25, 2016 - Medical Tourism industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a projected  
growth rate of up to 25% year-over-year for the next 10 ...

Global | BENCHMARK Today | Page 3

<https://www.benchmarktoday.com/category/investments/country/global/page/3/>

In a recent report issued by VISA and Oxford Economics, the Medical Tourism industry was valued at a  
staggering USD 439 billion, with a projected growth rate ...

[www.imtj.com](http://www.imtj.com) - IMTJ

[www.sousites.com/www.imtj.com](http://www.sousites.com/www.imtj.com)

Aug 1, 2016 - the eu debate, /articles/brexit-and-medical-tourism/, terms of use ... /blog/medical-tourism-  
industry-worth-439-billion-facts/, all countries ...

Travel Iowa: Tourism Map, Travel Guide, Things to Do, Iowa | Travel ...

[collegescholarships.in.net/travel-and-tourism-industry.html](http://collegescholarships.in.net/travel-and-tourism-industry.html)

Medical Tourism Industry Valued at \$439B; Poised for 25% Year-Over-the Medical Tourism industry was  
valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a ...

HTrends Hotel Industry News :: Hotel Resource

[www.hotelresource.com/HNR-companyid-cold-10671-HTrends.html](http://www.hotelresource.com/HNR-companyid-cold-10671-HTrends.html)

In a just released report issued by VISA and Oxford Economics, the Medical Tourism industry was valued  
at a staggering USD 439 billion, with a projected ...

Health | Journal Online

[www.journal.com.ph/health?start=&filter=3549](http://www.journal.com.ph/health?start=&filter=3549)

Jul 21, 2016 - In a just released report issued by VISA and Oxford Economics, the Medical Tourism  
industry was valued at a staggering USD 439 billion, with ...

More than one million Americans will leave the US for medical care ...

[www.istackr.com/.../More-than-one-million-Americans-will-leave-the-US-for-medical-](http://www.istackr.com/.../More-than-one-million-Americans-will-leave-the-US-for-medical-)

"Medical tourism" was valued at about 439 billion last year in a new report by Visa and Oxford Economics,  
which projected that it could grow 25 percent a year ...

More than one million Americans to leave nursing in the United States ...

[dailymetro.info > Health/Fitness](http://dailymetro.info > Health/Fitness)

"Medical Tourism" was worth about \$ 439 billion last year, a recent report Visa and Oxford Economics  
[1945901million], which is expected to enable it to grow 25 ...

tourism industry at \$439 billion. This figure was sourced from an industry report, not from Visa data nor was it a part of the larger research effort on the future of global travel. Upon further review and based on additional information, Visa will be updating that figure at about \$50 billion based on industry consensus. We apologize for the confusion this may have caused.

Read the MTQUA press release:

**MTQUA Medical Travel Quality Alliance inquiry leads Visa to correct its report and admit \$439 billion is not value of medical tourism industry.**

## Data: Who's asking? Who's using?

Medical Travel Quality Alliance is concerned less with the “big data” of *medical tourism* and much more about the data that matters to those participating in *medical travel*.

At MTQUA, we want to know – as do individual medical travelers, government officials responsible for and paying for individual medical travelers, human resource and health benefits managers, and insurance partners – what are the outcomes for each patient; how good is one hospital or one doctor over another; what is the value of a procedure or outcome compared with another; is a patient better off getting treated at one hospital over another, or better off being treated abroad?

In other words, if a patient can't get better, or can't get a good outcome, why should that patient travel away from home for medical care?

## Measuring what the industry needs

Researchers, economists and government statisticians have a need for one kind of definition of *medical tourism*. Recent OECD reports illustrate the difficulty at the international trade level of developing a useful definition of *medical tourism*.

However, medical professionals, health care providers, medical travel service providers and wellness companies have a need for a different kind of definition. With no common, practical understanding of *medical tourism* and other terms used in the *medical tourism* industry, can there be a common approach to the treatment and care management requirements of traveling international patients? Can we develop workable business models and marketing strategies?

Can we answer questions like “What are the needs of medical tourists?” or “How do we treat medical travelers?” or “How do we find/reach/market to medical tourists – or medical travelers?”

When the practical world and the world of research meet, as when academics survey practitioners to report on patient activity, significant misunderstandings can occur because of different definitions for *medical tourism*.



### The value of the medical tourism industry as reported by various organizations varies widely.

- **Stanford Research Institute:** (2013) \$50-60 billion
- **Transparency Market Research:** (2012) \$10.5 billion to (2019) \$32.5 billion
- **Patients Beyond Borders:** (2015) \$45-72 billion, growing at 15-25% (14 million “patients”) per year  
In May 2016, PBB was reported as estimating the value as \$38.5-55 billion, with 11 million consumers.
- **McKinsey & Co:** (2004) \$40 billion to (2006) \$60 billion to (2012) \$100 billion
- **Allied Market Research:** from 2015 to 2022, CAGR growth of 15.7% to (2022) \$143.8 billion
- **RNCOS:** (2015) 10 million medical tourists. From 2014 to 2018, CAGR growth of 22% in Asia, with Thailand, India and Singapore having 80% market share.
- **Kasikorn** (Thailand): 40% share of medical tourist arrivals in Asia. Medical travel and health travel to more than double from 2011 to 2015.
- **IMTJ:** 7 million medical “tourists”, 50 million health and wellness tourists

Medical Travel Quality Alliance focuses on the medical not the tourism part of “medical tourism.”

We measure medical travel as a relationship of the economic and demographic growth of the middle class by country, investment in health care, and the growing demand for health care by the middle class.

For more information, please email [caroline@mtqua.org](mailto:caroline@mtqua.org).

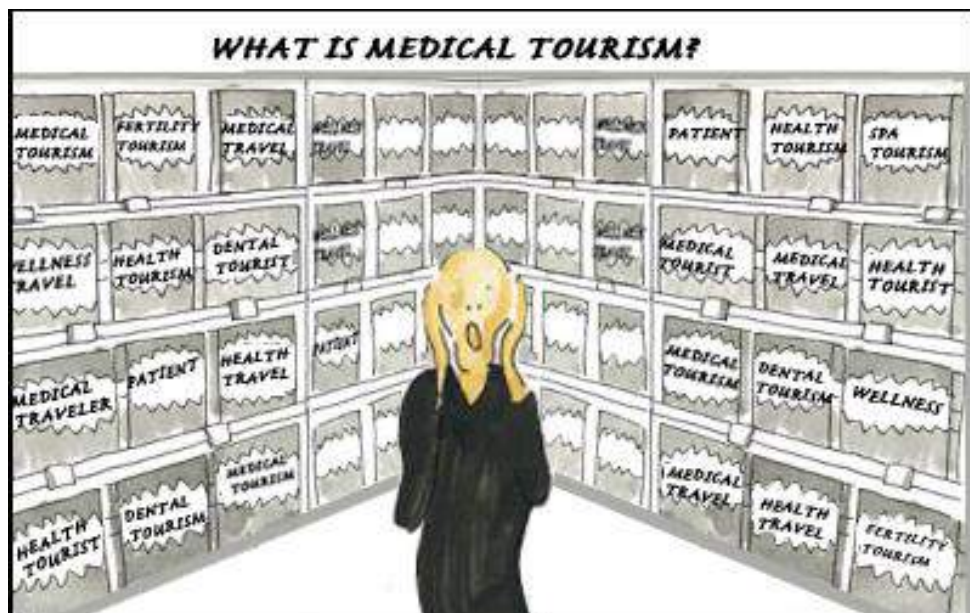


### 3. WHAT IS THIS INDUSTRY ABOUT?

Is it medical? Is it health? Is it wellness?

***Medical tourism, health tourism, medical travel, and wellness travel*** – these phrases are not interchangeable, yet they are being used interchangeably. Each of these has a very different meaning within different interest groups, leading to continuing confusion.

Researchers, economists and government statisticians have a need to define *medical tourism* in economic and sociological terms.



Medical professionals, health care providers, medical travel service providers and wellness companies have a different need, appropriate for the medical and health related services they offer.

## Lives are at stake

**Whatever disagreements on definitions academic** or other special interest groups may have, this paper is not written for them. This paper is written for the larger and more vital audience of medical professionals, health care and service providers, insurers, employers and patients.

All need to understand the role each plays in the *medical tourism* “supply chain” and by doing so, create a safer and better treatment and care environment for patients. This is a practical need and an essential one. Lives truly are at stake, as many of us can attest.

## Is it travel or is it tourism?

**The word *travel* – as in *medical travel* or *business travel*** – suggests a purposeful, not recreational trip. Highly-skilled, professional services accompany purpose-driven travel – educational conferences, continuing education workshops, various business, trade, or professional meetings.

The word *tourism* – as in *medical tourism*, *adventure tourism*, *cultural tourism*, or *culinary tourism* – reflects a more leisurely or pleasurable trip.

Associated with all varieties of *tourism* are non-professional service industries such as transportation services (airlines, cruise ships, tour buses), hospitality services (hotels, resorts) and entertainment venues (amusement parks, casinos, shopping malls, music and sports venues, theaters).

## 4. HEALTH TOURISM

Global policymakers struggle to find the right definitions

**If we accept the World Health Organization** definition of health, that *health* is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, *health tourism* is the broadest of all possible categories of health-related activity that involves travel.

In other words, *medical tourism* is a subset of *health tourism*.

Other subsets of *health tourism* may include culinary tourism, accessible tourism and sports tourism.

In *Medical Tourism: Treatments, Markets and Health System Implications: A Scoping Review*, a report for the OECD, Neil Lunt et al give this definition of *medical tourism*:

When consumers elect to travel across international borders with the intention of receiving some form of medical treatment. This treatment may span the full range of medical services, but most commonly includes dental care, cosmetic surgery, elective surgery, and fertility treatment.

In this definition, they allow only that cosmetic surgery that is done for reconstructive reasons:

Within this range of treatments, not all would be included within health trade. Cosmetic surgery for aesthetic rather than reconstructive reasons, for example, would be considered outside the health boundary.

Clearly, we strongly disagree with the exclusion of aesthetic cosmetic surgery from the definition of *medical tourism*.

First, as an invasive procedure, cosmetic surgery requires responsible, licensed medical professionals and a sterile, safe treatment room.

Second, who is to say that one person's cosmetic surgery is for aesthetic reasons and another's is not?

In an era where we are sensitized to the emotional and mental as well as physical needs of individuals, and where we provide service animals as emotional companions as well as companions for the blind or physically disabled, we are also beginning to recognize that what is aesthetic surgery for some is rehabilitative surgery for others.

As to *health tourism*, Lunt et al do not provide a clear definition. It seems they are describing *wellness travel*, not *health tourism*, when they say:

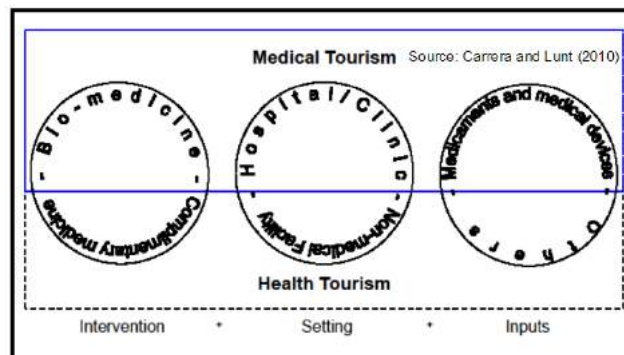
Medical tourism is related to the broader notion of health tourism which, in some countries, has longstanding historical antecedents of spa towns and coastal localities, and other therapeutic landscapes.

Some commentators have considered health and medical tourism as a combined phenomenon but with different emphases. Carrera and Bridges (2006, p.447), for example, define health tourism as "the organized travel outside one's local environment for the

maintenance, enhancement or restoration of an individual's wellbeing in mind and body." This definition encompasses medical tourism which is delimited to "organized travel outside one's natural health care jurisdiction for the enhancement or restoration of the individual's health through medical intervention."

Medical tourism is distinguished from health tourism by virtue of the differences with regard to the types of intervention, setting and inputs.

Lunt et al provide the following illustration of how they view *medical tourism* and *health tourism*.



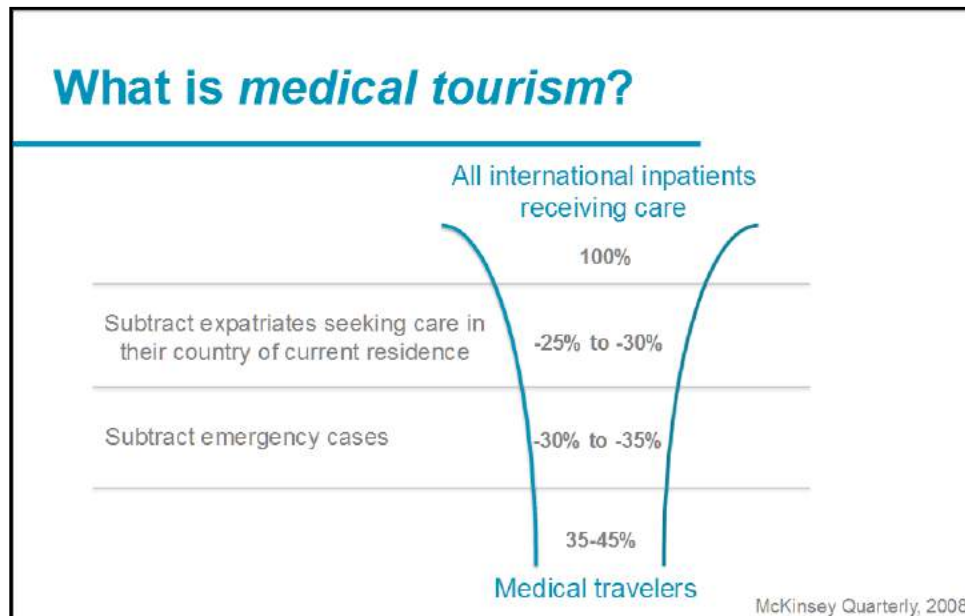
The World Health Organization (WHO) has no formal definition of *medical tourism* and acknowledges the difficulty of measuring the size of the industry.

No agreed definition of medical tourism exists; as a result methods applied by countries vary substantially.

Some countries count foreign patients' visits to hospitals whereas others count the entry of individual patients into the country.

Other countries record nationality but not place of residence of patients, can be problematic when migrants return to home country for treatment.

WHO references the McKinsey study on who is NOT a medical tourist:



Hope, the European Hospital and Health Care Federation, in a 2015 report, acknowledges that many definitions of *medical tourism* exist, and lists nine of them. This is a problem, they say.

Since the recognition and increased popularity of medical tourism, no unified definition has been universally accepted. This strongly affects the reliability and comparability of data, quality of published research, reports, statistics and articles. There have been however several attempts to define “medical tourism”.

## 5. MEDICAL TOURISM

### What is medical tourism?

**The term *medical tourism* has come to embrace** all facets of consumers seeking treatment, improvement or change through medical or wellness practices – provided they cross an international border to do so.

*Medical tourism* is the go-to keyword phrase for internet searches and advertising campaigns. For search engines like Google and Bing, *medical tourism* by far exceeds any other phrase when searching for cross-border health care options. But this pattern has begun to change. *Medical tourism* is no longer the widely used search term it once was. According to Google data, *medical travel* is being used almost as much as *medical tourism*.

Is *medical tourism*, the phrase, here to stay? Current evidence suggests that it may not be, that consumers may be distinguishing between *medical tourism* and *medical travel*.



## Has *medical tourism* lost its meaning?

***Medical tourism* is not a very useful or practical** concept for health care practitioners and service providers.

*Tourism* gauges success by the size and scope of an industry, identifying the top destinations, comparing growth rates, measuring the contribution of *medical tourism* to Gross Domestic Product, and other Big Data facts and figures that might demonstrate success and economic potential.

These facts and figures can be identified and counted, and thus are the numbers government departments and ministries can use to show growth and success. For more growth and success, governments put more money into more promotion, more and better publicity and more and better marketing of a destination and its features.

Notwithstanding that much of the data used to describe the industry is flawed and based on questionable assumptions, many use this data to measure the growth and success of *medical tourism*. Even the most outrageous data based on misinformed assumptions and poor definitions continue to appear in scholarly research and news reports.

With *tourism* data and parameters defining the industry, more important data that could make for a safer and better industry, such as health care outcomes, infection rates, etc., are overlooked or neglected.

It's no wonder that few doctors, nurses or other health professionals participate in the development of the industry. *Medical tourism* has little meaning for those

who provide the treatment and care that is at the heart of the industry.

Is it time to put *medical tourism* to rest, or to leave it to the economists and academics? Is it time to get on with the real work of *medical travel*?

## Global health care

**Some *medical tourism* participants are suggesting** that *medical tourism* is also *global health care*. Equating *global health care* with *medical tourism* only creates more confusion.

Global health is not *medical tourism*, and neither is global health care. References to *global health care* as *medical tourism* are creeping into usage by those whose interests may lie beyond the traditional scope of direct patient care for traveling international patients.

By entering new international markets under the rubric of *global health care* presented as *medical tourism*, insurance companies have received a warm welcome in countries that are anxious to explore the various opportunities offered by *medical tourism*.

Global health is the purview of multilateral organizations, government agencies, non-governmental organizations and private foundations that have accepted a mandate to expand and improve the delivery of standard health care around the globe, particularly in impoverished or disease-ridden regions.

Global health refers to a wide range of health problems, determinants, and solutions, such as epidemic infectious diseases, chronic illnesses and injuries, development, and foreign aid.

Secondary references to global health include global health care, global health systems, global health issues, and global health policy.

Global health care includes panoply of industries such as health care, pharmaceuticals, biotech, medical devices, health care logistics, consulting and business services.

## *Domestic medical tourism*

***Domestic medical tourism*** is a recently-coined phrase used chiefly to describe American patients traveling across state lines to obtain medical treatment.

In the U.S., insurance companies are regulated by each state, not by the federal government. Health care choices through insurance programs are limited to what is available in a patient's own state. If one lives in Texas, one can access health care throughout Texas, but not in neighboring Oklahoma.

It would be less confusing if this movement of patients was instead called domestic medical *travel* as these patients who travel domestically are almost exclusively seeking medical intervention for medical problems.

U.S. insurers and U.S. medical travel companies have begun to negotiate flat fees for surgeries across the country. They offer hospitals cash payments in advance in lieu of hospitals waiting for payment based on a cumbersome billing system.

This practice can make the surgery cost competitive with the cost of treatment abroad. Individuals who negotiate directly with providers increasingly get much lower pricing.

This practice is little known partly because hospitals do not want their patients to hear about them, since the package prices they offer at discount are typically not available to local patients.

Cost is the attraction but better or different treatment and care also factor into *domestic medical travel*.

In Canada, a similar *domestic medical travel* market may be in the making, as some patients in one province, to avoid wait lists or access special treatments, insist their provincial health care system pay for treatment in another province.

In countries where there is one primary national health care funder (U.K., Germany, France, etc.), domestic medical travel is not currently an issue. However, cross-border travel for health purposes throughout the European Union presents a different set of concerns.

## Cross-border health care

***Cross-border medical tourism***, particularly within Europe, has a meaning to economists specific to the ebb and flow of cross-border workers, migrants and retirees within the European Union.

But in popular media, it is starting to characterize regional *medical travel*, or *medical travel* to a nearby country. Closer to home, one usually drives rather than flies to the medical destination. It may include both *medical travel* and *wellness travel* and is often referred to as *cross-border health care*.

Cross-border *medical tourism* today may include Americans crossing into Mexico or Canada, Canadians crossing into the U.S., or residents of Caribbean island nations seeking care in nearby countries.

It may be important for policymakers to make distinctions such as *domestic medical tourism* and *cross-border medical tourism* but for health care providers and support services, they are all medical travelers.

## Diaspora medical travel

**Some medical travel companies have created** special *medical travel* programs for people with cultural and social ties or family roots in a medical destination. These are often first or second generation immigrants.

These companies argue a *medical travel* program will be more popular and patients easier to manage because the patients are in a familiar environment, maybe speak the local language, and have lower expectations of treatment or care.

## 6. WELLNESS TRAVEL

**A recent report for the global spa industry** documented how confused – and confusing – definitions used in *medical tourism* are. The authors surveyed spa industry executives in countries around the world.

One would expect them to have heard of and read about *medical tourism*, yet 25% could not provide a definition for *medical tourism* and other phrases.

Across the board, however, these industry executives were clear in their belief that *wellness tourists* are an entirely different consumer segment than *medical tourists*, and that their interests were entirely different.

The report defines *wellness tourists* as those who travel from home to proactively pursue activities for personal health and wellbeing **and** seek unique, authentic or location-based experiences and therapies not available at home.

It recommends that the term *health tourism* not be used to describe *wellness tourism*, or *wellness travel*. Certainly, in the context of the WHO definition, *wellness tourism* is not *health tourism*. It is a subset of *health tourism*.

The report makes an interesting observation that wellness businesses prefer to use the word “guest”, not “patient,” and focus on ambiance and experiences rather than outcomes.

For more expert analysis of wellness tourism and wellness travel, visit these websites:

[The Tourism Observatory for Health, Healing, Wellness and Spa](#)

[Global Wellness Institute](#)



## 7. MEDICAL TRAVEL

### Invasive vs. non-invasive procedures

**Wellness travelers may seek care characterized** as non-invasive: alternative therapies and wellness treatments; most dental treatments; some non-invasive cosmetic surgery procedures like Botox, facial fillers, spot liposuction, and fat injections; acupuncture therapy; Ayurveda; mineral spas; colonic cleansing; most executive check-ups.

It is critical to make a distinction between invasive and non-invasive procedures.

Insurance companies that issue medical travel insurance policies are clear about this. Medical travel insurance – different from travel medical insurance which covers tourists for accidental, unplanned medical treatment while on vacation – insures against complications of invasive procedures.

The U.S. government defines surgical and other invasive procedures as “operative procedures in which skin or mucous membranes and connective tissue are incised, or an instrument is introduced through a natural body orifice.”

Invasive procedures encompass a range of services, including:

- Minimally invasive dermatological procedures (e.g., biopsy, excision, or deep cryotherapy for malignant lesions)
- Extensive multi-organ transplantation
- All procedures classified as surgery
- Procedures such as percutaneous transluminal angioplasty and cardiac catheterization
- Minimally invasive procedures involving biopsies or placement of probes or catheters requiring entry into a body cavity through a needle or trocar

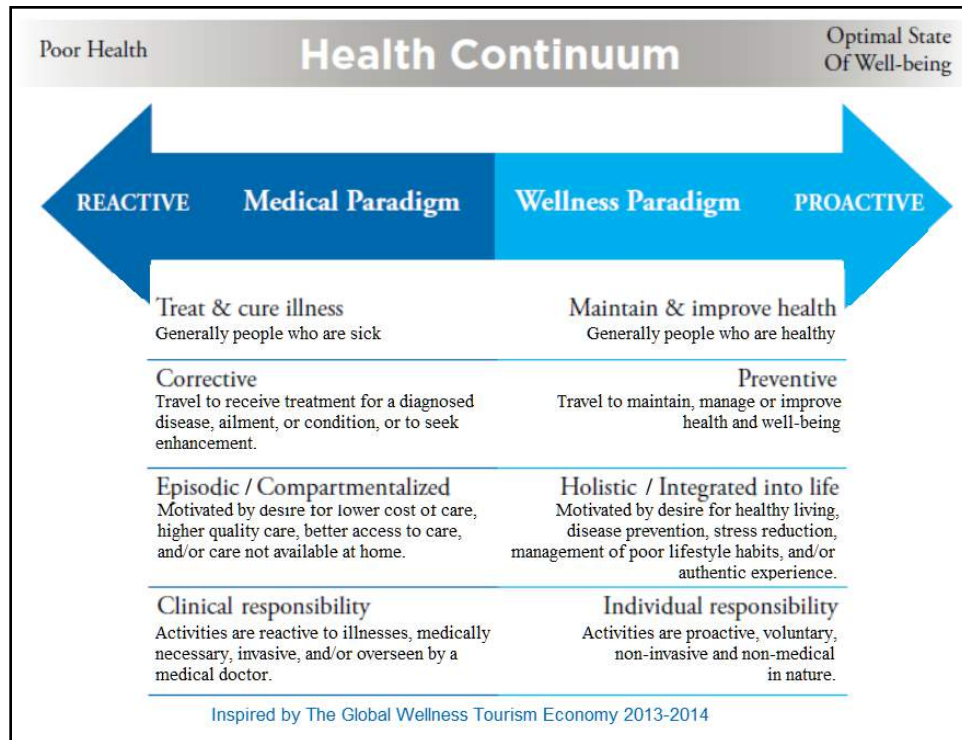
Some very minor procedures such as drawing blood or using certain instruments for examinations are technically invasive procedures but are not included in the definition.

Non-invasive procedures sought by wellness travelers are dental treatments (excluding implants), dermatology procedures, certain cosmetic procedures, some ophthalmology procedures, genetic testing and so on.

They may be single-purpose travelers, mostly focused on saving money, who travel across a border and return the same day. They may be on vacation and opt to have some non-invasive treatments at the same time as participating in *wellness tourism* activities. Medi-spas have emerged to serve these vacationers.

Similarly, Europe offers many spas for wellness travelers that traditionally provide healing waters and mineral baths, and are prescribed by medical doctors for rehabilitation.

This chart is useful to illustrate the differences between *medical travel* and *wellness travel*, and the continuum of activities that link the two.



## Medical tourism is not medical travel

***Medical travel* is a phrase very much preferred** over *medical tourism* by health care leaders, hospital executives, doctors and other medical professionals.

Most have reluctantly accepted the term *medical tourism* but many continue to dislike it because they feel it trivializes the process of getting and giving treatment and care.

*Medical travel* is the process by which a consumer (a patient) gets treatment for a medical condition. Treatment is nearly always invasive. It includes dental implants, fertility treatments, alternative or experimental procedures, addiction treatment, Lasik eye surgery, cancer therapies, as well as major surgery procedures.

Many *medical travel* patients, or *medical travelers*, require admission to hospital, whether for ambulatory care and a stay of less than 24 hours, or for inpatient care and overnight stay. Most require light or general anesthesia, administered by a licensed medical professional.

Most, if not all, must make their *medical travel* plans in advance. Seldom does one pop into a hospital or clinic casually for an invasive treatment. Indeed, those who do choose to have an invasive procedure on a whim may be putting themselves in harm's way and the facility or doctor who takes them may be negligent.

## 8. THE MEDICAL TRAVELER

### Characteristics of the medical traveler

#### **Medical travelers have 3 common characteristics:**

- They are not resident in the destination country
- They travel from home to a different country for care
- The cultural or social environment and/or language of the medical destination may be different or strange

They are traveling international patients.

A medical travel journey is distinguished by the following:

- Advance planning
- Exchange of medical records and medical history
- Pre-surgery instructions that may need to be followed prior to reaching the medical destination
- A procedure that is invasive and/or requires general or twilight anesthesia; or is a major non-invasive treatment (chemotherapy, radiation therapy, etc.)

- Consideration about the kind of accommodations that will be needed post-surgery
- Recovery care management
- Care planning and follow-up upon returning home
- Possible additional, unexpected medical attention

This last item is very important. The medical traveler may acquire an infection, get a complication, or have a bad outcome, likely needing further medical attention.

The medical traveler may be required to return to the original place of treatment, or may be able to receive treatment at home. Treatment at home may depend on how *medical travel* is perceived by the treating doctor at home.

## There are no re-dos for medical travelers

**A Singaporean colleague liked to use the example** of a tourist who books a vacation stay at a hotel advertising a “seaside” location. Upon arrival, the tourist finds the sea is across a highway and down a cliff from the hotel. Next year, when the tourist repeats his seaside holiday, he will be sure to choose a different hotel.

A medical traveler does not have the opportunity to “try out” a hospital and, if unsatisfied, try a different one. The medical traveler has one shot at getting it right. There are no re-dos.

## Are international patients medical tourists?

***International patients are not medical travelers or medical tourists.*** By reason of employment or retirement, they may reside in a foreign country, and they usually will seek medical care there. They are expatriates. Their homes and families are nearby.

Other international patients are people on vacation who are struck by illness, experience health-related symptoms that need attention, or have an accident while on vacation. Most of these international patients make their way to nearby clinics or hospitals for emergency care.

International patients may be considered “incidental” or “accidental” medical tourists – seeking treatment for an unplanned medical condition while on a foreign holiday. They may purchase travel medical insurance for emergency medical coverage along with trip insurance.



For hospitals in countries like the U.S., where *medical travel* is not an identified market segment, *international patients* is often a catch-all term for both travelers and expatriates.

These international patients may be offered translation services, travel arrangements, assistance with cross-border insurance or financial transactions and other “concierge” style activities by the hospital.

Migrant workers, retirees and new immigrants may sometimes be considered international patients rather than medical travelers. Issues surrounding access to health care for these groups are political issues, not issues of individual health choice.

All international patients would be well-served if hospitals used similar care management protocols as they reserve for medical travelers.

## International patients and medical travelers share common needs

**Medical travelers are traveling international patients.** International patients overlap with medical travelers in key ways in needing and expecting a supportive clinical and care environment.

A supportive environment may mean hospital staff that provide translation, deal with off-shore insurance approval and payment, and cater to “comfort” requests



such as better quality food, room upgrades, international television channels, and internet service.

For international patients, it is a bonus to find hospitals that have doctors and professional staff who are culturally in tune with them. If they have special medical treatment preferences or if they are demanding individuals who insist on full disclosure of care, they may present problems for unprepared hospitals.

## Are expatriates medical travelers?

**Many expatriates themselves firmly reject the** notion that they are medical tourists or medical travelers.

They live in the community where they seek treatment. They have support networks and groups of friends where they share information about living in that country, especially about hospitals, doctors, medications and other health-related matters. They know exactly where their embassy is and how to access assistance. They can ask for help and advice from corporate headquarters personnel.

Though they may need few of the services provided to medical travelers outside of the hospital, they certainly benefit from the same extras hospitals give medical travelers.

Most expatriates are covered by international medical insurance policies from their corporations, non-government organizations or home governments. These tend to provide generous health care coverage at the best

hospitals or, if care is not available locally, coverage is provided back in the home country or in a third country.

For locally-employed expatriates, say language teachers, local health care insurance plans are not as generous as international policies, and generally limit treatment to in-country hospitals. If a treatment is not available locally, they must find it elsewhere and pay for it on their own.

Expatriates become medical travelers when they travel to a different country for treatment.

## Are domestic traveling patients medical travelers?

**Patients who travel domestically for treatment** do not meet our definition of medical travelers. They travel for care but, notwithstanding the contradictions of American health care, they travel within their home country and enjoy a familiar cultural and social environment.

Their expectations of the care they will get are the same from one state to another. The parameters of the treatment that domestic traveling patients receive are common. Laws and regulations are common. Language and customs are common. The tools they have to remedy poor outcomes are the same.

## 9. SOURCES

<https://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/48723982.pdf>

[http://www.globalwellnesssummit.com/images/stories/pdf/wellness\\_tourism\\_economy\\_exec\\_sum\\_final\\_10022013.pdf](http://www.globalwellnesssummit.com/images/stories/pdf/wellness_tourism_economy_exec_sum_final_10022013.pdf)

[http://www.who.int/global\\_health\\_histories/seminars/kelley\\_presentation\\_medical\\_tourism.pdf](http://www.who.int/global_health_histories/seminars/kelley_presentation_medical_tourism.pdf)

[http://www.bmgf.gv.at/cms/home/attachments/3/9/5/CH1161/CMS1182951248070/hope\\_medical\\_tourism\\_september\\_2015.pdf](http://www.bmgf.gv.at/cms/home/attachments/3/9/5/CH1161/CMS1182951248070/hope_medical_tourism_september_2015.pdf)

## About the author

### Julie W. Munro

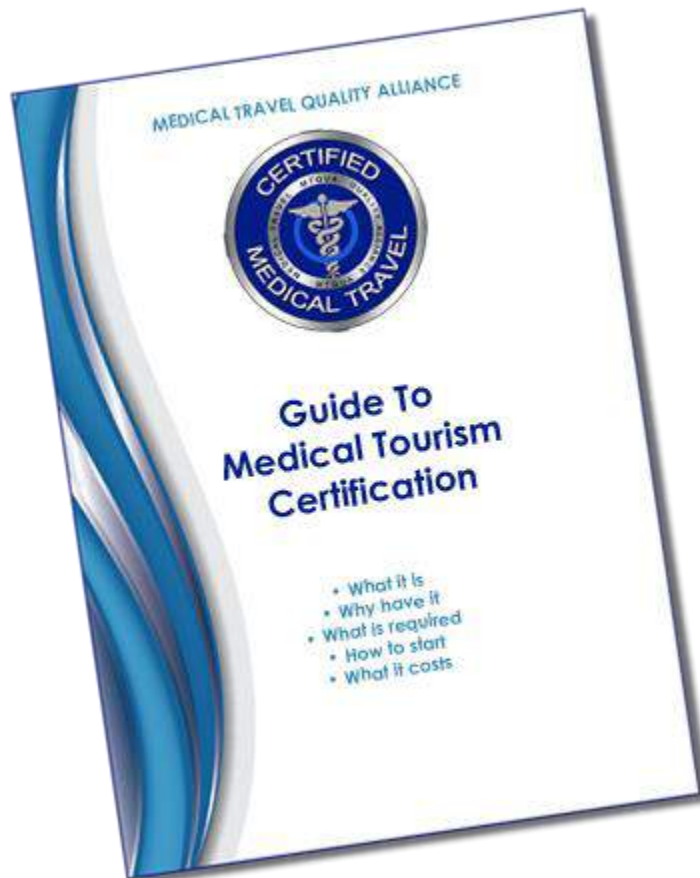
Julie W. Munro is one of the pioneers of medical tourism. She is president of the Medical Travel Quality Alliance (MTQUA <https://www.mtqua.org>), which she founded in 2009 to promote safer and better care management throughout the industry, yielding better outcomes for medical tourists.

She has been a leader in medical tourism for more than a decade. She founded her medical concierge business, Cosmetic Surgery Travel, in 2003. The company and its clients have been featured in television and print reports in the U.S. including Fox News, ABC Television, NBC, Washington Post, Fodor's Travel Guides and others.

As a business consultant to the medical travel industry, Munro offers clients her experience as a successful facilitator for thousands of patients, her marketing acumen in promoting health care and related services for medical tourists, and her extensive worldwide network of medical tourism "practitioners" including business experts, health care professionals and clinical specialists from established and emerging traditional and alternative medical and health-related fields.

#### Conflict of Interest Disclosure

Neither the author nor the publisher has or has ever had a financial or personal relationship with any business or entity named in this paper.



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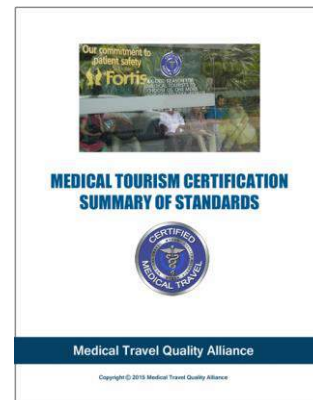


## *Medical Tourism Certification*

Medical tourism certification from MTQUA is available for hospitals, clinics, medical tourism facilitators and agents, specialty treatment centers, wellness spas, resorts, hotels and any organization that provides support services to medical tourists and international patients. More information is available on the [MTQUA website](https://www.mtqua.org/medical-tourism-certification/) at <https://www.mtqua.org/medical-tourism-certification/>

Becoming certified requires that the organization or business meets specific international best practice standards covering:

- Privacy, security, safety for medical travelers
- Care management processes and protocols
- Marketing and communications
- Transparency of business and health practices
- Patient experience
- Social and cultural customs and environments
- Internet and website practices
- Professional practices
- Business services and operations
- And more ...



## MTQUA Products and Services



**Medical Tourism Certification** MTQUA offers the only cross-services medical tourism certification for hospitals, clinics, agencies, specialty treatment centers, resorts, etc., including training and workshops to support and enhance certification standards and protocols.

MTQUA and the International Air Transport Association (IATA) co-present the Medical Travel Specialist Diploma for travel agents. Medical travel and health tourism curriculum is featured as core learning modules at selected universities and colleges around the world.



### **World's Best Hospitals for Medical**

**Tourists™** MTQUA annually publishes a list of best hospitals for medical travelers, based on quality medical treatment, patient care and medical travel best practice.



**Medical Travel Advisory™** MTQUA monitors quality and safety conditions for medical tourists and issues warnings and watches as needed to alert medical tourists to potentially higher risks in certain situations.



**MTQUA Verified Testimonial** MTQUA verifies accuracy of testimonials and other “social proofs” for health care websites.



**Best Practices In Medical Tourism** Evidence-based best practices demonstrate how to produce results better than those achieved by other means, and are used as a benchmark against which to judge one's own practices and to improve those practices.



**Medical Travel Patient Registry™** Medical tourists may use the MTQUA network to monitor their medical travel plans and patient journey from start to finish.



**Inside Medical Travel Newsletter** Subscribe to the MTQUA newsletter for useful tools, information and insights to help you grow your medical tourism business.

<https://www.mtqua.org>

## About Medical Travel Quality Alliance



Medical Travel Quality Alliance (MTQUA, <https://mtqua.org>) is an independent international organization founded in 2009 to promote improvement in quality outcomes and care management for international patients and medical travelers around the world.

MTQUA products and services benefit and support all consumers and providers. Through Medical Tourism Certification, Best Practices in Medical Tourism and other programs:

- We assist and support consumers who are seeking quality health services as medical tourists.
- We support hospitals, clinics, doctor groups, alternative treatment centers, health and wellness assistance agencies and facilitators, recovery resorts and related businesses around the world in promoting and providing better quality services to medical tourists.
- We assist local, national and regional and non-government agencies to create responsible medical tourism programs for their economic and development goals and inbound patient needs.
- We help public health care agencies to find the right medical tourism providers and services for their health care budgets and outbound patient needs.

*MTQUA has offices in USA, Canada and Thailand. Contact MTQUA via its website at <https://www.mtqua.org/> or by email to [RN@mtqua.org](mailto:RN@mtqua.org)*