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# Raising concern about the information provided on medical travel agency websites: A place for policy

Áine Maguire<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sarah Bussmann<sup>c</sup>, Celine Meier zu Köcker<sup>b</sup>,  
Sanne E. Verra<sup>b</sup>, Lavinia Alexandra Giorgi<sup>b</sup>, Kai Ruggeri<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Policy Research Group, Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, CB2 3EB Cambridge, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup>University of Maastricht, Minderbroedersberg 4-6, 6211 LK Maastricht, The Netherlands

<sup>c</sup>Policy Research Group, Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, CB2 3EB Cambridge, United Kingdom

## KEYWORDS

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## Abstract

Patients are increasingly choosing to travel abroad for essential but non-urgent medical treatments, such as hip and heart valve replacements. Websites are frequently the first contact point with potential international service providers, such as medical travel agencies (MTAs). Yet only a few studies have previously assessed the standard of information provided on the websites of MTAs. This study examined the information provided by European MTA websites using a modified version of the Health on the Net (HON) code. A content analysis of the information collected assessed how the MTA websites promoted their services and communicated the risks, benefits and other issues related to medical travel. Twenty-seven websites based in thirteen different European countries were identified and coded using a modified version of the HON tool. Considerable inconsistencies across websites were noted on all domains assessed and no single item of the tool was addressed by all websites. The most frequently included item on websites was a contact form (74%), but no website provided information on risk rates, or used scientific references to support their claims. The promotion of benefits of medical travel coupled with the absence of risk communication was concerning. It is evident that there is a need for a policy which considers the regulation of MTAs and the information and services that they provide.

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*Abbreviations:* HON, Health on the Net; MTA, Medical travel agencies

\*Corresponding author.

*E-mail addresses:* [am2349@cam.ac.uk](mailto:am2349@cam.ac.uk) (Á. Maguire), [sarah.bussmann@gmx.de](mailto:sarah.bussmann@gmx.de) (S. Bussmann), [celinemzk@googlemail.com](mailto:celinemzk@googlemail.com) (C. Meier zu Köcker), [sev24@cam.ac.uk](mailto:sev24@cam.ac.uk) (S.E. Verra), [a.giorgi@student.maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:a.giorgi@student.maastrichtuniversity.nl) (L.A. Giorgi), [dar56@cam.ac.uk](mailto:dar56@cam.ac.uk) (K. Ruggeri).

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## Introduction

Medical travel, the act of travelling abroad for essential but non-urgent medical treatment, is a growing phenomenon [1-3] that has been marketed as an alternative to high medical costs, long waiting lists, and prohibitive services in the home country. Medical travel increases patient autonomy and enables patients to choose the type of medical care that they want [4]. Since the implementation of the Patients' Rights Directive in 2013, EU citizens can get reimbursement for treatment received abroad [5]. Additionally, a number of industrial changes, such as the significantly decreased costs in air travel, the rise of the internet, and the emergence of healthcare intermediaries, have contributed to the growth of the industry [6].

Yet, organising healthcare in another country is a significant and potentially stressful undertaking. It involves numerous tasks, including finding an appropriate medical facility with suitably trained physicians, negotiating prices, arranging payments, transferring medical records and the booking of accommodation [7]. Additionally, the plethora of options to choose from may become overwhelming, as the options can range from clinics in the neighbouring country to destinations halfway around the globe [8]. One common way to deal with these issues is to employ a medical travel agency (MTA), a commercial service that facilitates all the arrangements relating to medical travel [4,9].

Websites are central to introducing and promoting the services of MTAs to medical travellers [10]. The internet has largely facilitated the expansion of medical tourism, and websites are frequently the first contact point for the consumer [11]. These websites provide a network of links to countries, hospitals and clinics. They often feature patient stories, testimonials and virtual tours of particular facilities [12]. As commercial websites, they are designed to present information on treatment possibilities and to attract consumers. They emphasise the benefits of medical travel and often refer to affordable, timely, high-quality, reliable care with the latest technology [13-17]. Many websites also stress a pleasant tourism component. They often include advertisements for various services related to medical travel such as accommodation and travel sites [4,10].

MTAs have increased access to the medical travel market. However, they are subject to much criticism, and the area in which they operate has been termed a 'regulatory vacuum' [16]. Websites are relatively simple and inexpensive to create, with little or no medical and regulatory oversight over the nature of information conveyed on these websites [11]. Basic quality standards to ensure that these businesses provide accurate and reliable information regarding their services advertised are absent. The lack of standards and control over these websites raises concerns regarding patient safety. The treatments offered may not fulfil minimum quality standards, practitioners may not have received adequate training, and for instance the lack of economic and legal frameworks can cause problems regarding follow-up care or malpractice [18]. These safety elements are difficult for patients to assess [11], especially when misled by attractive websites. With many agencies entering the market in a very short period of time, it is essential to examine what sort of information they provide,

how they market themselves, and what kind of services they offer [4,20-23]. This is pertinent given the current absence of international minimum standards for any aspect of medical travel, and the focus of these websites on the benefits of treatment abroad, neglecting potential risks [11].

Limited research is available on this topic, and the studies that have been conducted have either predominantly focused on the North American markets, or are broad analyses of websites from several regions at the same time (i.e. Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe). Lunt et al. [11] identified one hundred commercial English-language medical travel websites that offer dental and weight-loss surgery, most of which located in Europe. Non-European locations included were Mexico, India, the USA, and Tunisia. From these, only thirty websites were selected as potential sources of information for medical travellers. They assessed the websites by complementing clinical checklists with the Health on the Net (HON) [24] code, and found that half of the selected websites did not provide guidance on medical treatment, and only one of the websites included information on legal redress [11]. However, existing research often fails to acknowledge regional differences when conducting the analysis. It is therefore not possible to draw any conclusions for the reliability and trustworthiness of the information of European-based facilitators, focusing on all treatment types available.

Given the notable absence of academic research on the topic, Cormany and Baloglu [13] highlight the importance of investigating what information and services MTAs deem necessary to convey to the medical traveller. In order to do this, the HON code is considered, following the methodology of Lunt et al. [11]. The HON code is the oldest and one of the most widely used codes of ethics, developed with the purpose of standardizing the reliability of online medical and health information and guiding lay users, as well as medical professionals to useful and reliable online medical information [24]. The code in itself is a comprehensive evaluation tool that offers a thorough evaluation of health related websites. However, the direct use of this code for medical travel websites raised compatibility concerns, as certain issues highly relevant to the medical travel process are not included. To make the HON code more suitable for the analysis of MTA websites, the HON has been modified to additionally assess what services are provided beyond merely access to treatment abroad. Examples of aspects included are Skype consultations, transport abroad, and accommodation. Additionally, language and translation options are assessed, and it is investigated whether or not credentials of the healthcare provider are present. It is furthermore tested if the sites address health risks specific to medical travel, if they deal with cross-border liability, treatment options, and adhere to EU regulations. Moreover, attention is paid to the ways in which services are promoted, and if they focus on in example low-costs, shorter waiting time, quality, or the travel opportunity.

This study aimed to examine the information provided by MTA websites that intend to attract EU citizens to travel for treatments in EU countries or Turkey. Turkey was included as it is a popular medical travel destination for EU citizens [25], and due to its close proximity to the EU. As a result of

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