

UK: Medical Tourism Brings Significant Profit to NHS

One of the important sources of income for UK's National Health Service (NHS) are the international patients who come to the country for medical treatment. However, the number of UK residents who go abroad for private treatment is more than the international patients who travel to UK for NHS or private treatment.



These are the findings of a recent study on the cost and benefit of medical tourism to the NHS which was published in PLOS ONE. The study was funded by National Institute for Health Services and Delivery Research Program and was conducted by researchers from the University of York and from London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

The study extensively analyzed the impact of UK's medical tourism on NHS economy. The researchers conducted interviews with returning UK medical tourists, analyzed the international passenger survey, reviewed published literature and conducted interviews with NHS managers and policy makers.

To obtain figures on foreign medical tourists, the researchers made 28 requests to NHS foundation trust hospitals in UK. 18 hospitals then provided useable information. The researchers found out that despite the number of health travelers treated in these hospitals was small, 7% of the patients provided almost a quarter of NHS income. This was approximately GBP 42 million (EUR 50 million) for the 18 hospitals in the study that was conducted between 2010 and 2011. Among the 18 hospitals which provided the data, 13 of them were from London while the remaining hospitals were spread around the UK and well known for their experts.



Johanna Hanefeld, who was the leading author of the study, said that according to the research, private foreign patients contributed more income to NHS than the UK patients who were treated privately within

the NHS. She pinpointed that this is a strategic area for the growth of NHS Trust. Following the NHS reforms which removed the cap on the private generated income, it can be shown that there is a chance for NHS trust fund to grow if they expand the private patient activities.

She added that UK is losing a lot of funds through exportation of its patients for abroad treatment. The study showed that 63,000 UK residents travelled abroad for further treatment in 2010 while only 52,000 patients came to UK seeking treatment within the same year. The data also show a substantial increase in the number of UK citizens travelling out of the country for treatment within a period of one decade. The numbers do not include UK citizens who go abroad combing leisure and treatment since when asked the reason of going out of the country, they simply answer to spend holiday.



Concluding the study analysis, Neil Lunt said that medical tourism is the only sure way for NHS to increase income from non NHS sources and therefore, they need to improve their efficiency.

Figures generated from the IPS data showed that most of the UK citizens usually travel to the North, West and Southern Europe for medical treatment. Over the decade, France has become the most frequently visited country followed by Eastern Europe while Hungary and Poland are increasingly becoming popular places for medical travels. However, major sources of international medical tourists who come to UK include Spain, Middle East, Cyprus, Greece, Kuwait and Dubai.

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