

MEDICAL TOURISM IN MEXICO IS DEVASTATED BY THE PANDEMIC



When crossing the United States-Mexico border into Algodones, Baja California, travelers enter a street full of drugstores, dental clinics and ophthalmologist offices. Medical tourism in Mexico has been a growing sector. Currently, the industry reports declining numbers.

A steady number of Americans and Canadians carefully examine the city's streets on foot, lured by the growing reputation of health professionals in Mexico, a much-welcomed alternative to the skyrocketing costs of health services in their home countries.

In the United States, for example, cosmetic and weight loss surgeries, dental work and other types of procedures cost 40% to 70% more than in Mexico. **In Canada, dental work is not included in the public health system, making Mexico an attractive destination for medical tourists.**

Like Algodones, cities such as Nogales, Ciudad Juárez and Piedras Negras have become mandatory stops for those looking to undergo dental procedures, while Tijuana and Mexicali stand out for cosmetic and bariatric surgeries. Once in these cities, and thanks to the many other border communities that have transformed into popular destinations for medical trips, it is easy to see how Mexico's tourism industry in 2018 generated between US\$8 and 8.8 billion, according to a Deloitte study.

Between 2013 and 2018, Deloitte reported that, "the medical tourism in Mexico has grown at an average annual rate of 33.7%," employing thousands of doctors, dentists, chiropractors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health professionals.

Mexico is ranked second as a world medical destination, only surpassed by Thailand. Although the most visited destinations are along the border, about 8.7 million medical visits (including one-day trips and trips with overnight stays) took place across the United States-Mexico border in 2019, and medical tourism is gaining popularity in further southern states, such as San Luis Potosí, Quintana Roo, Puebla and Jalisco.

Showing rapid growth since 2010, medical tourism and its revenues were expected to keep growing in 2020 and beyond. But then the coronavirus pandemic began.

In March of this year, when the pandemic was only starting to affect North America, approximately 727,530 trips were made from the United States to Mexico for health reasons, showing already a significant decrease in arrivals in January and February, and going down from 839,120 health trips recorded in March 2019.

Partly, the reason were the restrictions introduced on essential travel, which includes most medical treatments and trips to pharmacies. These limitations on land borders, enforced since March 21, will continue until at least November 21. As a result, several drugstores and dental clinics near the border have witnessed a drop in demand between 70% and 75% in the last months. Now, most of the patients are local residents, Mexican tourists, and small groups of Americans and people with dual

citizenship with permission to cross the border.

The consequences have been mass layoffs and reduced income for healthcare professionals. In turn, this has had an impact on other industries closely tied to medical tourism, like restaurants, bars and shops. Just as other localities dependent on tourism, border cities are also failing to collect significant amounts of taxes and indirect revenue, losses that will impact the community entirely. This has drastic socio-economic implications for communities that were already experiencing a decline in tourism since the early 2000s due to insecurity.

The US-Mexico border is unlikely to fully reopen and allow medical travelers to freely enter the country before the end of 2020, but will remain closed for non-essential travel until an effective vaccine is available for widespread use. So, what can these businesses do?

Community leaders, government agencies and healthcare professionals should work on alternatives to traditional medical tourism, including promoting medical destinations worldwide and offering special discounts to tourists from profitable markets beyond the United States and Canada.

Through flights, travelers from Europe, the Middle East and Asia can avoid the restrictions imposed on land borders in North America, even if other restrictions are in place. **Travel incentives (low-cost health tourism packages) could also attract national tourists interested in visiting the northern border for medical and dental procedures.**

Similarly, with proper training and certification, medical service providers will be able to adapt by focusing on 'essential' services, such as cancer and root canal treatments, rather than optional procedures, which in the past made up the majority of the healthcare market on the border.

Regardless of the efforts made in the present or in the immediate future, it will take time for destinations such as Algodones to regain their position as one of the most visited locations in Mexico.

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