

A Methodology to Assess the Impact of Medical Travel on Imports and Exports of Medical Services

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Background: Recent innovations in the health care market have incentivized U.S. residents to seek out lower cost alternatives for medical care in other countries. At the same time, improvements in the collection and dissemination of information about international medical providers have promoted alternatives to U.S. medical care for international consumers seeking high quality medical care outside of their own country. While these innovations have likely changed the balance of mobility and the balance of trade in medical care, little quantifiable data are available.

Objectives: This paper describes the challenges in quantifying inflows and outflows of medical travelers and potential data sources for information on the number medical travelers. We developed a methodology for more accurately estimating the balance of mobility for medical care as well as the balance of trade in medical care.

Methods: We reviewed existing data sources the report inbound and outbound travel related to medical care and assessed their value as a means for quantifying medical travel. These data sources included the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, The United Nations Statistics Division's Interagency Task Force on Service Statistics and U.S. Office of Travel and Tourism Studies of the International Trade Administration.

Conclusions: As information dissemination on costs, quality and access to medical care across countries continues to improve, more people will travel to other countries for medical care. The World Health Organization has outlined a methodology for estimating trade in health services, information are not yet collected consistently. New data sources are needed to estimate inbound and outbound travel specifically for medical care as well as the balance of trade in medical care. Despite the importance of understanding the type and quantity of patients lost to other countries for medical care obtained abroad compared to the success of health care organizations in attracting international patient volume to their organizations, novel ways of collecting this information are required.