
Brits seeking treatment abroad

By editor

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Filmmaker Michael Moore praises the UK's National Health Service as a model for the U.S. in his latest film, "Sicko," but record numbers of British citizens have apparently not seen the movie and are going abroad and paying out of their own pockets to obtain better health care.

More than 70,000 Britons will have treatment abroad this year, the London Sunday Telegraph reported, a number that is forecast to rise to 200,000 by 2010.

In the first survey of its kind in the UK, Britons said long waits for treatment by the NHS and fears of the growing hospital-infection crisis were the primary reasons they chose to seek medical care elsewhere.

India is the most popular destination for surgery, followed by Hungary, Turkey, Germany, Malaysia, Poland and Spain. According to the survey conducted by Treatment Abroad, "health tourists" from the UK travel to 48 countries.

The NHS is coming under increased criticism for its failure to provide health care. Cases of the superbug *Clostridium difficile* have increased 500 percent in the last 10 years and are expected to climb above the 55,000 cases reported in 2006.

Long waiting periods for surgery have imposed a de facto rationing system on medical treatment. Last month, a British man was told he did not qualify for a simple surgery because he was a smoker.

Costs for the NHS have risen due to increased bureaucracy that prevents nurses from seeing patients and increased compensation to general practitioners that have seen their earnings rise over 50 percent in the last three years.

Health tourists are courted on the Internet by foreign doctors and hospitals that offer consultations online or with agents in the UK. Cost of a heart-bypass operation in India, including the flight and hotel, are less than half what the same would cost at a private British hospital. The shortage of dentists in Britain is being met by dentists in Hungary.

"The confidence that the public has in NHS hospitals has been shattered by the growth of hospital infections and this government's failure to make a real commitment to tackling it," said Katherine Murphy, of the Patients' Association. "People are simply frightened of going to NHS hospitals, so I am not surprised the numbers going abroad are increasing so rapidly. My fear is that most people can't afford to have private treatment – whether in this country or abroad."

In the survey, almost all of those who obtained treatment abroad said they would do it again.

Source: *World Net Daily* website, 30.IV.2008;