



# Dental tourism

Michael Sultan explores the good, the bad and the opportunities.

**D**entists already feel very hard done by in Britain. They worry about the NHS, contract changes, increasing costs, and now they feel anxious about losing out to dental tourism too. I have seen the good, the bad and the very ugly of dental tourism, but



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I can also recognise that there are opportunities there for UK practices.

## The good

First of all, it's worth mentioning that dental tourism isn't free for the patient. What may cost £20k in England might cost £10k-£15k in the good European clinics. This remains a substantial sum of money, especially when factoring in the flights and accommodation, so it's really not as black and white and all about the money as people may think.

I have dealt with one implant clinic in particular that is fantastic. They perform the triage, see what patients need and ensure that all of the perio and the endo are completed in Britain first, so that when the patient goes over to them they are ready to go. They offer a great service, looking

after the whole journey, making the process entirely stress free.

So how do they do it cheaper? Firstly, their overheads are significantly less. In fact, the dental tourists are paying double what a local patient would pay. So, like everything else, it comes down to a numbers game.

Secondly, and more importantly, they work much more efficiently. They have really commoditised the whole process so that it works seamlessly. Everything is prepped and ready in advance, so the patient is seen and treated in the shortest possible time.

## The bad

However, for some areas of dental tourism we see a different story altogether, one which isn't founded

On service and efficiency. This can include unsubstantiated claims of impossibly high success rates, a lack of enforced regulation and a focus on short-term solutions through more invasive quick-fix treatments.

Patients with severe periodontal disease can go abroad for a year's worth of treatment crammed into the space of a week. With this, there is no time allotted for healing or recovery in between procedures. It may save money in the short term, but when they sit in my chair afterwards I can tell it's going to be just as costly to remedy.

What is more, there is no scope for offering these patients any kind of reassurance. We know that after treatment there may be questions or a filling that is too high or too sharp, and this is easily remedied with a quick return visit. But with dental tourism they cannot so easily or conveniently return to the practice that administered their treatment to have it looked over.

### The opportunities

Herein lies an opportunity for UK

practices to forge partnerships with some of the more reputable clinics. On the one hand, it means that they do the expensive work and you have to cover the costs of repairs, but this can also help strengthen relationships with existing and potential patients as we provide much needed reassurance.

Another opportunity arises when considering costs. I get sent a number of OPGs of UK patients from foreign clinics for analysis. One thing I notice is the number of broken teeth and amount of substantial decay. For these patients, it's not that they've had poor treatment up to that point, rather they've had no treatment at all, have become desperate and cannot afford private treatment in the UK.

Clearly there are patients able to pay more than NHS costs, but less than standard private, and these are the patients who become dental tourists abroad. If UK practices were to work more efficiently and still do good work, then perhaps they could tap into this market?

Finally, we should remember that

dental tourism does go two ways. We often hear about people coming to the UK to give birth and seeking cheaper medical services, but we have patients coming here for dentistry too. Why do they do this? Because they trust our quality, our infection control and our reputation. Dental tourism is therefore also an opportunity for us to sell our services and to be proud and realise that it's not always about cost.

My attitude toward dental tourism has certainly changed. From initially pitying those who felt it necessary to seek treatment overseas, to now thinking: "if they pick the right clinic, they will get the right treatment at the right price". It seems that some patients aren't quite as price sensitive as we assumed, they just need good treatment, great service and reassurance. Often these patients are at the point of embarrassment or neglect. Perhaps, if we were to treat them more gently and non-judgmentally, offering a service they could afford, they might well stay here and this could open up a whole new market in Britain.

## NHS → Private? Your key questions answered...

### Q. How should I communicate a move to private practice to my patients?

A. *A carefully worded and personalised letter will help introduce the change. However, this should always be backed up by a face-to-face conversation so you can address your patients' questions or concerns and reassure them of the benefits the change will bring.*

*Of course, your team will have a vital role to play in communicating the change to patients, so training is essential to ensure everyone understands the key messages and is able to communicate them clearly and consistently. We have a wealth of experience in all of these areas and we'd be delighted to help you and your team make a successful transition to private practice. Just get in touch if you'd like to start the conversation.*

→ **Les Jones** is the Marketing Director at Practice Plan and has over 30 years' experience in branding and marketing. Les is part of our NHS Change Support Team; a group of specialists on hand to provide expert support and guidance on successfully converting to private practice.



Do you have more questions that need answering? Visit [www.practiceplan.co.uk/nhs](http://www.practiceplan.co.uk/nhs)

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