

Complications and costs to the NHS due to outward medical tourism for elective surgery: a rapid review

April 2025

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Background

'**Outward medical tourism**' is when people seek medical treatment overseas. This is often driven by factors like cost and shorter waiting times.

However, there are concerns that people travelling abroad for surgery **may be at risk of complications** when they return home.



Aim

To answer the following questions:

- 1 What are the **long and short-term complications** of outward medical tourism for elective surgery, that are treated in the UK by the NHS?
- 2 What are the **costs to the NHS** from treatment of **complications and follow-up care** due to medical tourism for elective surgery?
- 3 What **benefits are there to the NHS** from outward medical tourism for elective surgery?

Evidence Base

37 studies published between 2007 and 2024.

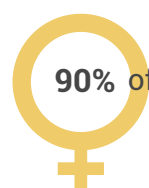
The evidence base contained reports of **655 patients treated by the NHS** between 2006 to 2024

- 35 case reports described patients treated by the NHS for complications.
- 2 surveys of plastic surgeons in the UK.

- 19 related to **weight loss surgery** (**385 patients reported on**)
- 17 related to **cosmetic surgery** (**265 patients reported on**)
- 1 related to **eye surgery** (**5 patients reported on**)

14 studies included an analysis of the **costs to the NHS** for the treatment of complications.

No studies outlining the **benefits of outward medical tourism to the NHS** were found.



Demographics

90% of patients across all studies were female.

Age range 14 - 69.

Average age 38 years.

The most common procedure undertaken by women was cosmetic surgery.

Key Findings



The most common type of **weight loss** surgery was **sleeve gastrectomy** (aka Gastric Sleeve)

The most common symptoms were:

- abdominal pain
- vomiting
- inability to swallow
- malnutrition

Gastric leak was the most common diagnosis.

Over a third of patients presenting with complications needed their **procedure reversed or revised.**



The most common **cosmetic single procedure** conducted abroad was **abdominoplasty** (aka 'Tummy Tuck')

The most common complications were:

- infection
- reopening of the surgical wound

The most common treatment was antibiotics.

Just over half of patients presenting with complications required an investigation under **local or general anaesthetic.**

There is evidence that patients undergo **multiple procedures at the same time.**



Costs to the NHS ranged from **£1,058 to £19,549 per patient** in 2024 prices.

The highest costs were reported as being related to:

- longer stays in hospital
- surgical treatment

The certainty of evidence for costs was **very low** and the **economic impact on the NHS** was thought to be **potentially highly variable.**

Research Implications

- We **still do not know** how many UK residents go abroad for elective surgery or how many people subsequently have complications. Without this data we cannot fully understand the risk.
- A **systematic approach to collecting information** on the impact of treating complications arising from medical tourism on the UK NHS is needed.
- The scale of the problem in Wales is **almost completely unknown.**
- No studies were conducted in primary care, so we **do not know** the impact of outward medical tourism **on GP and community services.**
- There is no evidence **comparing the short or long-term health outcomes of people who travel abroad** for elective surgery **versus** those treated in the UK (either in the NHS or privately). A direct comparison would allow for a better estimate of costs and benefits to the NHS.



The full rapid review, **including economic considerations**, is available to view here:

<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2025.04.02.25325086v1.full>