

Health tourism Africa's economic game-changer

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The global growth in the flow of patients and health professionals as well as medical technology, capital funding and regulatory regimes across national borders has given rise to new patterns of consumption and production of healthcare services over recent decades.



A significant new element of a growing trade in healthcare has involved the movement of patients across borders in the pursuit of medical treatment and health; a phenomenon commonly termed 'medical tourism'. Medical tourism occurs when consumers elect to travel across international borders with the intention of receiving some form of medical treatment. This treatment may span the full range of medical services, but most commonly includes *dental care*, *cosmetic surgery*, *elective surgery*, and *fertility treatment*. There has been a shift towards patients from richer, more developed nations travelling to less developed countries to access health services, largely driven by the low-cost treatments available in the latter and helped by cheap flights and internet sources of information.

Pan-African health tourism is on the rise, having surpassed expectations on the spectacular deliveries produced within the medical sector. Grown in prominence by successfully adopting international processes has created an undisputable attraction of international and African health travel seekers into the economy.

Success rates for procedures that can have high infection, such as heart, bone marrow and kidney transplants, are comparable to those at some of the world's most renowned hospitals, making health tourism a not to be missed revenue generating opportunity.

With nearly seven million patients annually travelling to different regions across the world to seek healthcare, the global health tourism industry is valued at \$20 billion per year. South Africa has gained a reputation as a destination of choice for:

- Cosmetic surgery (*breast, face, liposuction*)
- Dentistry (*cosmetic and reconstruction*)
- Cardiology/cardiac surgery (*by-pass, valve replacement*)
- Orthopaedic surgery (*hip replacement, resurfacing, knee replacement, joint surgery*)
- Bariatric surgery (*gastric by-pass, gastric banding*)
- Fertility (*IVF*)
- Organ, cell and tissue transplantation (*organ transplantation, stem cell*)
- Eye surgery
- Diagnostics and check-ups

Furthermore, South Africa, alongside other African countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana have a sophisticated, well developed and organised tourism industry which competes comfortably with some of the best tourism destinations in the world especially regarding the provision of recuperation facilities.

With the above in mind, the opportunities for Health Tourism on the African continent are vast. It is necessary to create a pan-African platform for engagement and sharing of ideas amongst all the parties in the industry value chain as well as amongst African countries who can benefit from a coordinated industry approach.

The Pan-African Health Tourism Congress is the flagship event of the health tourism sector, designed to serve as the exemplar of the optimised African health tourism event model under the banner “Taping a Larger Share of the Health Wallet”, seeking to table, endorse policies and strategies which will expand the health tourism industry to address a broader market – meaning more business for all.

The congress will address among other issues the 21st century style of health tourism:

- The large numbers of people travelling for treatment;
- The shift towards patients from richer, more developed nations travelling to less-developed countries to access health services, largely driven by the low-cost treatments and helped by cheap flights and internet sources of information;
- New enabling infrastructure – affordable, accessible travel and readily available information over the internet;
- Industry development: both the private business sector and national governments in both developed and developing nations have been instrumental in promoting medical tourism as a potentially lucrative source of foreign revenue.

The congress is scheduled to take place from 7–9 June at the **uMfolozi Hotel Casino Convention Resort, Empageni, KwaZulu-Natal**.

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