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Record numbers go abroad for health treatment with 70,000 escaping NHS

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Record numbers of Britons are travelling abroad for medical treatment to escape the NHS - with 70,000 patients expected to fly out this year.

And by the end of the decade 200,000 "health tourists" will fly as far as Malaysia and South Africa for major surgery to avoid long waiting lists and the rising threat of superbugs, according to a new report.

The first survey of Britons opting for treatment overseas shows that fears of hospital infections and frustration of often waiting months for operations are fuelling the increasing trend.

Patients needing major heart surgery, hip operations and cataracts are using the internet to book operations to be carried out thousands of miles away.

India is the most popular destination for surgery, followed by Hungary, Turkey, Germany, Malaysia, Poland and Spain. But dozens more countries are attracting health tourists.

Research by the Treatment Abroad website shows that Britons have travelled to 112 foreign hospitals, based in 48 countries, to find safe, affordable treatment.

Almost all of those who had received treatment abroad said they would do the same again, with patients pointing out that some hospitals in India had screening policies for the superbug MRSA that have yet to be introduced in this country.

Andrew Lansley, the shadow health secretary, said the figures were a "terrible indictment" of government policies that were undermining the efforts of NHS staff to provide quality services.

The findings come amid further revelations about the Government's mishandling of NHS policies, and ahead of official statistics that will embarrass ministers.

On Wednesday, figures are expected to show rising numbers of hospital infections. Cases of the superbug *Clostridium difficile*, which have risen five-fold in the past decade, are expected to increase beyond the 55,000 cases reported last year.

On the same day, statistics will show that vast sums have been spent on pay, with GPs' earnings rising by more than 50 per cent in three years to an average of more than £110,000.

New research shows that growing NHS bureaucracy has left nurses with little time to see patients – most spending long periods dealing with paperwork.

Katherine Murphy, of the Patients' Association, said the health tourism figures reflected shrinking public faith in the Government's handling of the NHS.

"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," she told The Sunday Telegraph.

"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."

Low prices in India, where flights, hotels and a heart bypass cost less than half the price charged by British private hospitals, explain its top ranking in the survey by Treatment Abroad, a British website providing information on hospitals overseas.

Hungary's popularity rests on a boom in dentistry, thanks to a shortage of NHS dentists in Britain.

The British Medical Association advised people to be careful when considering treatment abroad, highlighting the dangers of flying soon after surgery, which can cause complications.

A spokesman said: "Travelling can place a great deal of stress on the body. Patients travelling abroad for surgery should consider their fitness to fly and get an understanding of an appropriate convalescence period before attempting to return home."

A Department of Health official said the number of patients seeking treatment abroad was a tiny fraction of the 13 million treated on the NHS each year.

Waiting times had fallen. Almost half of patients were treated within 18 weeks of seeing a GP. Most people who had hospital care did not contract infections.

For more details:

Website: www.tajmedical.com

Email: info@tajmedical.com

Tel: +1-877-799-9797 (USA/Canada)

Tel: +44-2476-466-118 (Internationally)

Tel: 0800 1076 360 (Free Phone – UK Only)