

What does approval of the EU Directive mean for medical travel in Europe?

Will [Treatment Abroad](#) clients see a surge in patient numbers following the approval of the [EU Directive on Cross-Border Healthcare](#) by the European Parliament last week?

We would like to say...Yes! But the reality may be a little different. So....let's take a look at how the EU Directive may (or may not) change the way that healthcare works in Europe and more importantly whether it will give a boost to the medical travel sector.

The right to cross border healthcare

The EU Directive does not give patients any rights to cross border healthcare that they don't have already. **It doesn't introduce any new rights.** These rights have already been established by the European Court of Justice.

The Directive aims to establish a framework within which cross border healthcare will operate and to set the rules regarding how patients will access care and what kind of treatment they are entitled to. The new rules should be in place by 2013 (in theory...).

So, there will not be an overnight change and we are unlikely to see a surge in the number of cross border patients within the EU.

Government funding

Within the UK, there are already well established procedures for National Health Service patients who wish to exercise their right to cross border care under existing EU law. Every NHS trust has (in theory) a procedure in place to deal with requests and to manage the process. See "[NHS Choices - Planned treatment abroad](#)".

Last year, it is believed that around **500 British patients** exercised their right to cross border healthcare and underwent treatment abroad that was funded by the NHS.

So, with the approval of the EU Directive, will 500 become 5,000 or even 50,000? It's unlikely.

One reason is simply **awareness of the EU treatment option** amongst the general public. It isn't in the interests of the NHS to promote the EU option. And there is no-one in the medical travel sector with the kind of marketing budget required to really boost awareness of medical travel within the UK (or within any target market in Europe).

Opportunities to promote funding of medical travel

However, this doesn't mean that hospitals within the EU and medical travel facilitators can't exploit some of the opportunities presented by the EU Directive. If a patient approaches you needing an operation, you should always check if they are aware of their EU rights to cross border healthcare and the possibility of **third party funding** of their treatment.



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Patients want treatment close to home

Another reason for steady rather than exponential growth in cross border healthcare is that the "propensity to travel" amongst patients will always be low. When patient choice within the NHS was extended to allow patients to travel anywhere within the UK for treatment (internal medical tourism) as opposed to just their local area, little changed. Even if there was a waiting list in their local area, patients preferred to wait for local treatment rather than travel to another NHS hospital 100 miles away for immediate treatment.

So what will drive growth?

In the longer term, what may drive growth in cross border healthcare is how governments, insurers, payors and patients deal with the increasing pressure to **reduce expenditure on healthcare**.

Significant changes are taking place within healthcare systems in the UK and elsewhere driven by rising national debt and the resulting need for reductions in public expenditure. There may be more overt "rationing" of healthcare services and encouragement for patients to fund or co-fund their treatment. Such changes may create a more open market in healthcare in which the cross border healthcare option plays an increased role.

Time will tell...

Become a Treatment Abroad client, and benefit from our knowledge of cross border healthcare

At [Treatment Abroad](#), we share our knowledge of cross border healthcare, of medical tourism and of online marketing with our clients. We're currently working on a patient guide, "**Your rights to cross border healthcare in Europe**". As a Treatment Abroad client, you can request a free electronic copy for distribution to your patients.

So, why not contact Jeff Coxon at Treatment Abroad to find out how we can help you to grow your business in cross border healthcare.

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