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Hope from Abroad in the International Medical Travel of Yemeni Patients

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Abstract

Studies of care-seeking behaviour have generally focused only on the medical facilities that are available within a country's national boundaries. However, a growing number of patients worldwide are pursuing medical services outside of their own countries. The burgeoning literature on 'medical tourism' tends to offer the perspectives of the treatment destinations, not the experiences of patients. This paper examines the international medical travel of patients from the capital-poor country of Yemen. Families in Yemen often sacrifice greatly to seek the advanced, trustworthy technological medicine that is unavailable locally. The paper draws on interviews conducted with 71 Yemeni medical travellers in India and Jordan, as well as a survey of 205 doctors in Yemen about their disclosure practices regarding terminally ill patients. While perhaps an attractive option in today's global world, the use of medical services abroad affects local perceptions: it perpetuates a lack of trust in local capabilities, invites criticism of

the government for not providing care to its citizens and fosters the hope that a cure exists somewhere in the world.

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Notes

Notes

[1] As with most Yemeni patients and family members, Abdul 1. Rahman referred to his medical condition as a ‘tumour’. His oncologist used the word ‘cancer’ with me. Most Yemenis avoided the word ‘cancer’ (saratan, in Arabic) because of the devastating consequences the disease implied. In Kangas (in preparation, a), I discuss the preference in Yemen to avoid speaking directly about upsetting information. Terminally ill patients, for example, are generally not told about their conditions. In this paper, I use the term ‘cancer’ rather than ‘tumour,’ without specifying the type of cancer.

[2] Interview with Dr Abdulnasser Al-Munibari, Yemen Times, 6–12 November 2001, vol. 11, no. 32, p. 3. Available at: www.yementimes.com/01/iss32/interview.htm (accessed 6 Nov. 2001).

[3] In Kangas (in preparation, b), I discuss moral aspects of seeking medical care abroad. While the topic was included in my initial submission to Anthropology & Medicine, anonymous reviewers found the discussion to be under-developed.

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