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LETTERS

COSMETIC SURGERY ADVERTISING

Discussion on banning advertising of cosmetic surgery needs to consider medical tourists

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The discussion on banning advertising of cosmetic surgery neglects an important aspect of safeguarding UK consumers from direct marketing by cosmetic surgery providers to the public¹: an increasing number of UK patients travel abroad for cosmetic surgery.

In 2010, 63 000 UK residents travelled to access treatment abroad.² Our research indicates that around 30% (18 300) of them were cosmetic tourists. This echoes the results of a survey conducted by *Which?* magazine: 28% of medical tourists travelled for cosmetic procedures.³ This is likely to be a growing trend: 97% of people considering cosmetic surgery would consider travelling for it.⁴

Our research shows that most patients identify and choose foreign providers through the internet. This underlines the necessity to extend considerations to the internet and specifically medical tourists. We found that patients who travelled for cosmetic treatment are unlikely to consult their general practitioner out of fear of being judged. There is thus greater urgency for accessible information and guidance for those considering travelling abroad for cosmetic surgery.

A ban on advertising by UK providers will address some of the concerns raised by the recent PIP scandal, as might regulation

of advertising if enforcement measures are in place. However, a comprehensive review of cosmetic surgery needs to consider the increasing number of patients travelling abroad for cosmetic procedures or risk that its recommendations are little more than a short term fix.

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- 1 Godlee F. Promoting cosmetic surgery [Editor's choice]. *BMJ* 2012;345:e7535. (8 November.)
- 2 Smith R, Lunt N, Hanefeld J. The implications of PIP are more than just cosmetic. *Lancet* 2012;379:1180-1.
- 3 Which? We expose medical tourism pitfalls. *Which?* 2008 Mar 20. www.which.co.uk/news/2008/03/we-expose-medical-tourism-pitfalls-135137/.
- 4 Nassab R, Hamnett N, Nelson K, Kaur S, Greensill B, Dhital S, et al. Cosmetic tourism: public opinion and analysis of information and content available on the Internet. *Aesthetic Surg J* 2010;30:465-9.

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