

Record numbers go abroad for health

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Record numbers of Britons are flying abroad for medical treatment to escape NHS waiting lists and the rising threat of hospital superbugs.

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Thousands of "health tourists" are going as far as India, Malaysia and South Africa for major operations – such is their despair over the quality of health services.

The first survey of Britons opting for treatment overseas shows that fears of hospital infections and frustration with NHS waiting lists are fuelling the increasing trend.

More than 70,000 Britons will have treatment abroad this year – a figure that is forecast to rise to almost 200,000 by the end of the decade. 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 custom. 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



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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 said. "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."

Some foreign hospitals touting for business on the internet offer consultations in hotels in Britain. But other patients are happy to rely on email to discuss their treatment with doctors thousands of miles away. 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.

Mr Lansley said: "Healthcare is an area where Britain could be a world beater because we have some of the best research and best clinicians. If people don't trust the health service, then that is a terrible indictment of this Government, which has turned the NHS into a nationalised bureaucracy, instead of something able to focus on what patients want."

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.