In 2014, more than 52,000 Canadians received non-emergency medical treatment outside Canada.

Physicians in British Columbia reported the highest proportion of patients (in a province) receiving treatment abroad (1.6%). The largest number of patients estimated to have left the country for treatment were from Ontario (26,252).

Across Canada, neurosurgeons reported the highest proportion of patients (in a specialty) travelling abroad for treatment (2.6%). The largest number of patients (in a specialty) travelled abroad for internal medicine procedures (6,559).

One explanation for patients travelling abroad to receive medical treatment may relate to the long waiting times they are forced endure in Canada’s health care system. In 2014, patients could expect to wait 9.8 weeks for medically necessary treatment after seeing a specialist—3 weeks longer than the time physicians consider to be clinically “reasonable” (6.5 weeks).
Introduction

By learning how many Canadians receive health care in another country each year, and the type of care they receive, we can gain some insights about the state of health care in Canada and the state of medical tourism among Canadian residents.

Canadians who choose to seek treatment abroad do so for several reasons, many of which may relate to their inability to access quality health care in a timely fashion within Canada’s borders. Some patients may be sent out of the public health care system due to a lack of available resources or because some procedures or equipment are not provided in their home jurisdiction. Others may choose to leave Canada because they are concerned about quality (Walker et al., 2009) and are seeking more advanced health care facilities, state-of-the-art medical technologies, or better outcomes. Others may leave in order to avoid some of the adverse medical consequences of waiting for care, such as worsening of their condition, poorer outcomes following treatment, disability, or death (Esmail, 2009; Barua et al., 2013). Some may leave simply to avoid delay and to make a quicker return to normal life.

While there is no readily available data on the number of Canadians travelling abroad for health care, it is possible to produce an estimate of these numbers from data gathered through the Fraser Institute’s Waiting Your Turn survey and from the Canadian Institute

Table 1: Average percentage of patients receiving treatment outside of Canada, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialty</th>
<th>BC</th>
<th>AB</th>
<th>SK</th>
<th>MB</th>
<th>ON</th>
<th>QC</th>
<th>NB</th>
<th>NS</th>
<th>PE</th>
<th>NL</th>
<th>CAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plastic Surgery</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gynaecology</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophthalmology</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otolaryngology</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Surgery</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurosurgery</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopaedic Surgery</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiovascular Surgery</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urology</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Medicine</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiation Oncology</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Oncology</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Specialties</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Averages for provinces and specialties with missing data should be interpreted with caution.
for Health Information (CIHI), which tallies the numbers of procedures performed in Canada.

**Estimating the number of patients leaving Canada for health care**

Each year, the Fraser Institute conducts a survey of physicians across Canada in 12 major medical specialties: plastic surgery, gynaecology, ophthalmology, general surgery, neurosurgery, orthopaedic surgery, cardiovascular surgery, urology, internal medicine, radiation oncology, and medical oncology.\(^1\)

Included in the survey is the question: “Approximately what percentage of your patients received non-emergency medical treatment in the past 12 months outside Canada?” The answers are averaged for each of the specialties studied in Waiting Your Turn for each province, producing a table that reports the average percentage of patients receiving treatment outside Canada (Barua and Fathers, 2014: table 11). These percentages are shown in table 1.

In 2014, 1.1% of patients in Canada were estimated to have received non-emergency medical treatment outside Canada, compared to 0.9% in 2013 (Barua and Esmail, 2013: table 11). Physicians in British Columbia reported the highest proportion of patients (in a province) that received treatment abroad (1.6%), while at the other end of the scale physicians in Prince Edward Island reported that only 0.4% of their

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\(^1\) See Barua and Fathers (2014) for information regarding procedures constituting each specialty.
Leaving Canada for Medical Care, 2015

 Patients travelled abroad for treatment in 2014. Across Canada, neurosurgeons reported the highest proportion of patients (in a specialty) travelling abroad for treatment (2.6%), while the lowest proportion of patients (in a specialty) travelled abroad for plastic surgery (0.3%) (see table 1).

Combining these percentages\(^2\) (table 1) with the number of procedures\(^3\) performed in each province and in each medical specialty gives an estimate of the number of Canadians who actually received treatment outside the country.

**Results**

Table 2 indicates that a significant number of Canadians—an estimated 52,513 people—received treatment outside of the country in 2014. This is a considerable increase from the estimated 41,838 who travelled abroad in 2013 (Esmail and Barua, 2013).

Increases between 2013 and 2014 in the estimated number of patients going outside Canada for treatment were seen in eight provinces: Ontario (from 19,118 to 26,252), British Columbia (8,146 to 9,799), Quebec (4,904 to 6,284), Alberta (5,527 to 5,988), New Brunswick (372 to 742), Saskatchewan (714 to 1,050), Nova Scotia (927 to 975) and Prince Edward Island (927 to 975). Conversely, in that period there was a decrease in the estimated number of patients who received treatment outside Canada in Newfoundland & Labrador (from 486 to 327) and Manitoba (1,636 to 1,048).

Table 2 also shows the estimated number of patients receiving treatment outside of Canada by specialty. For example, we estimate that approximately 6,559 Canadians travelled abroad in 2014 to receive internal medicine treatments. On the other hand, we estimate that only about 100 Canadians went abroad to receive radiation oncology treatment in 2014.

**Limitations**

Two data-related issues must be noted. First, data for the number of procedures performed in Quebec in 2012/13 was not available to Barua and Fathers (2014). As a result, they made a pro-rated estimate of surgeries in Quebec using the number of acute surgeries performed in the province in 2011/12.\(^4\)

Second, there is a temporal mismatch between the timing of the Fraser Institute’s *Waiting Your Turn* survey and the CIHI’s annual data release. Specifically, procedure counts data used for *Waiting Your Turn* are typically one year behind (e.g., the 2012 edition of *Waiting Your Turn* used procedure counts from 2010/2011). While the calculations above use the temporally mismatched procedure counts to provide up-to-date information, previous calculations adjusting for the temporal mismatch show that it does not appear to materially affect the trend witnessed in the overall count of Canadians. However, it does, as expected, affect the actual counts of Canadians (Esmail, 2007).\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Readers should note that this calculation uses the exact values, not the rounded values that appear in table 11 in Barua and Fathers (2014).

\(^3\) Data is for 2012/13 from the Discharge Abstract Database (CIHI, 2013a) and the National Ambulatory Care Reporting System (CIHI, 2013b). For further details see Barua and Fathers (2014).

\(^4\) This may limit comparisons with estimates from previous years for Quebec, and for Canada as a whole.

\(^5\) Specifically, the Canadian counts with the temporal mismatch for 2004, 2005, and 2006 were 49,392, 50,447, and 51,121, respectively.
The number of patients receiving treatment outside Canada each year produced by this methodology is likely to be an underestimate. This is the result of a few factors. Most importantly, these numbers are based on specialist responses, which means that patients who leave Canada without consulting a specialist are not likely to be included in the count shown in table 2. The counts are also based on the number of procedures estimated to have been performed in Canada, which is less than the total number of patients consulted and less than the total number of Canadians who would have required treatment, including those who left Canada to seek it.

Discussion

These numbers are not insubstantial. They point to a sizeable number of Canadians whose needs and health care demands could not be satisfied within Canada’s borders.

There are a number of possible reasons why this may have been the case. Some patients may have been sent out of country by the public health care system due to a lack of available resources or the fact that some procedures or equipment are not provided in their home jurisdiction. Others may have chosen to leave Canada in response to concerns about quality (Walker et al., 2009), seeking more advanced health care facilities, more state-of-the-art medical technologies, or better outcomes.

Conclusion

In 2014, an estimated 52,513 Canadians received non-emergency medical treatment outside Canada. In some cases, these patients needed to leave Canada due to a lack of available resources or a lack of appropriate procedures or technologies. In others, their departure will have been driven by a desire to return more quickly to their lives, to seek out superior quality care, or perhaps to save their own lives or avoid the risk of disability.

Clearly, the number of Canadians who ultimately receive their medical care in other countries is not insignificant. That a considerable number of Canadians travelled abroad and paid to escape the well-known failings of the...
Canadian health care system speaks volumes about how well the system is working for them.

References


Canadian Institute for Health Information [CIHI] (2013a). Discharge Abstract Database, 2012-2013. Canadian Institute for Health Information.


Bacchus Barua is a Senior Economist in the Fraser Institute’s Centre for Health Policy Studies. He completed his BA (Honours) in Economics at the University of Delhi (Ramjas College) and received an MA in Economics from Simon Fraser University. Bacchus has conducted research on a range of key health care topics including hospital performance, access to new pharmaceuticals, the impact of aging on health care expenditures, and international comparisons of health care systems. He also designed the Provincial Healthcare Index (2013) and is the lead author of The Effect of Wait Times on Mortality in Canada, and Waiting Your Turn: Wait Times for Health Care in Canada (2010–2014).

Feixue Ren is a research intern at the Fraser Institute. She holds a Master’s Degree in Economics from Lakehead University and a BA in Statistics from Hunan Normal University in China. Since joining the institute, she has co-authored an assortment of studies on fiscal policy including tax competitiveness and government debt.
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