

Medical Tourism Facilitator's Handbook

Maria K. Todd



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First off, I want to thank my husband, Alan. You have provided support and encouragement even if from time to time, it came in the form of pouting and complaining that you wanted some "Ria time." You have sacrificed that "Ria time" so that I could meet the commitments of a growing business and the authorship of this book. You've cooked, helped out, fetched tissues when I cried that I couldn't handle the stress of so much going on at once, and you've rubbed my shoulders and neck when I've spent too many hours in the chair working.

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The *Medical Tourism Facilitator's Handbook* evolved out of an awareness that arose while I attended a conference associated with the Medical Tourism Association (MTA) held in San Francisco in September 2008. What I witnessed was not only comical, but sad and, to my trained eye, frightening.

In preparation for attending the event, I was provided a list of attendees and organizations. I used this list to do some due diligence. More than 40 of the vendors and facilitators listed had websites that were parking spaces for a Uniform Resource Locator (URL) without content. Many others were home pages with links to nowhere. I labeled all those as "not ready for primetime."

I met several individuals who identified themselves as new facilitators. Each paid several thousands of dollars in combined admissions, airfares, hotel and other travel expenses to this expensive city to attend the conference. While there, everyone did their best to meet medical providers, attend showcase presentations by the providers, negotiate representation agreements, and close business deals.

Some of these new facilitators had no business cards and were embarrassed when asked to exchange cards with hospital personnel or medical providers. For example, I stood next to an individual at one booth sponsored by a hospital and heard the following: "We just started our business

last week so we don't have any cards, but my partner is at Kinko's right now getting some printed for us because we didn't know if we would need them for this."

At another booth from a hospital in Malaysia, a gentleman in his 50s came up and introduced himself. When the person at the booth asked him his background and experience as a facilitator, the gent stated that he had been a truck driver until the previous six months when he injured his back. The hospital representative chuckled and said, "Well, I guess you know orthopedics then, eh?" to which the gent replied, "Them are bones, right?" I had to step away or risk being labeled rude as I could not contain my amusement. This comically demonstrates how not everyone seeking to be involved in medical tourism is a medical or travel expert.

I also encountered hospital personnel and other providers who were not ready for medical tourism business but had high hopes of establishing a foothold in the industry. Also present were foreign government economic development representatives and travel and tourism development representatives, all hoping to promote their countries as medical tourism destinations, but they had representatives who themselves could not speak enough English to win my confidence as to their level of preparation.

All in all, according to the Medical Tourism Association spokesperson, the attendance at that event was over 800 individuals. The sponsors generated a lot of revenue at that event and many press releases. More of these have been scheduled, and many more thousands of dollars in revenue will be produced.

What I did not see was a venue or forum to host or present the intense training necessary to combine four very distinct roles—that of travel planner, case manager, concierge, and web portal developer—into that of a professional medical travel facilitator.

I sat at a table with Susanne Sapa, RN, CCM, of Maryland, and Gerald Milden, a seasoned veteran producer in the trade show industry (PC Expo, MacWorld Expo, E3, and Microsoft's Windows World), and we shared our observations and discussed what was missing over coffee.

Sapa was planning to become a facilitator and was there to explore the industry. Her background included being a traveler nurse in Washington, DC, who accompanied patients being repatriated back to the United States. She was also a nurse in a large, integrated health delivery system in Virginia and a certified case manager and registered nurse. She had a business partner who was a surgeon, and together they planned to activate a business sometime in 2009. She has since activated her business after months of planning, legal expense, travel, and provider network development.

Milden, on the other hand, was there to explore the business potential of the trade show and determine if his model would be successful in that domain. He started work on a company called International Medical Expositions, and had booked four venues in Canada under the brand MedExpos. As a seasoned entrepreneur and investor, he put the project on hold when the economy soured. As the Kenny Rogers song goes, "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away and know when to run." I respect him for having the courage to postpone, knowing what I know as an experienced meeting planner. He forfeited many thousands of dollars but cut his losses and those of his investors. If and when he tries again, I will be there to support him 100%.

I was there in the capacity of managing partner of my consultancy in global health care program development (Global Health Sources, LLC) to determine the state of the industry, the potential need for our consulting services, and to perhaps do some networking. I never went there with the intention of writing a book such as this or its provider compendium, *Medical Tourism Program Development*, or to establish another nonprofit in this space—The Council on the Global Integration of Health Care (www.cgih.org).

Upon my return from the conference, I immediately called Kristine Mednansky, my longtime friend and editor at Productivity Press, who was also my publisher at McGraw Hill Health Care Education Group for my first three books. I proposed this book and she brought it forth to the review committee, along with the companion book, *Medical Tourism Program Development*, and both were accepted.

I am indebted to several others, including many physicians and hospital providers who gave their wisdom and time in critique, resources, and generosity to bring this book to reality.

Josef Woodman is the author of *Patients Beyond Borders: Everybody's Guide to Affordable, World-Class Medical Tourism*, second edition. His books have emerged as the leading books for the growing market of Americans seeking an alternative to the pricing quagmire, uncertain insurance coverage, and inconsistent delivery of health care services in the United States. It's been praised by ABC News, the *Washington Post*, travel guru Arthur Frommer and *Travel + Leisure Magazine*.

Barbara Baker, a dear friend and new facilitator, helped me prove concepts as I wrote the book by actually going through the processes suggested to establish her new business. Together, we inspected hospitals as potential providers for her network, reviewed representation contracts, toured hotels and museums, and met with dignitaries interested in promoting medical tourism in Mexico. My research and planning and theories came to life as we validated the suggested preparation, policies, procedures, activities, and investigations outlined in this book to ensure they were based in reality, not just theory.

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