

# Certified, bona fide?

As interest in medical tourism grows around the world, so too does the number of certification schemes available to providers wishing to access this market. Those applying for certification can include hospitals, medical tourism



facilitators, alternative health centres, spas and travel agencies, with either the organisation or an individual professional being 'certified'. But are these schemes a welcome tool for providers wishing to prove the true quality of their offerings, or simply a way for unscrupulous cowboys to cash in by selling worthless certificates to the unwary? **James Paul Wallis reports**

In April 2014, Keith Pollard, CEO of UK-based Treatment Abroad, wrote in an *International Medical Travel Journal* blog post that a plethora of 'get rich quick' certificates were appearing around the medical tourism industry that were quick and easy to obtain. Drawing parallels between the interest in medical tourism and the California gold rush in the 19th Century, he said: "I made the point that in a gold rush industry, it is not necessarily the prospectors who make the money. It is the saloon owners (and brothel keepers!) who keep the prospectors entertained, and the entrepreneurs and store owners who sell the supplies and the shovels that make a healthy profit. In a gold rush, there are always people who are happy to sell you a map of where the gold is to be found. And so it has become with certification in medical tourism – 'I'll sell you a certificate and this will bring you medical tourism gold!'"

#### Option paralysis?

Pollard's organisation, Treatment Abroad, does

not offer certification, but it does offer its Code of Practice for Medical Tourism. He stressed that the Code is not intended to assess nor accredit healthcare providers in terms of quality of care or treatment outcomes. Importantly, Pollard explained that the organisation does not make a profit from the fees it takes from providers that join the scheme, as the money is passed on to external assessors. He explained: "The Code was developed by external consultants in discussion with our medical tourism clients. These external consultants also monitor providers for compliance with the code. These individuals are experienced [UK National Health Service] healthcare assessors whose expertise lies within this specific area." Based in Germany, Temos is an independent certification body that provides a range of certification options including 'Excellence in Medical Tourism', 'Quality in International Dental Care' and 'Quality in International Reproductive Care'. The company was born off the back of a research project led by the German Aerospace Centre (DLR) in 2005,

and its 'Quality in International Patient Care' certification was officially launched to the market in 2010. Dr Claudia Mika, managing director of Temos, gave us her view on why there has been an expansion in the number of certification schemes available in recent years: "In general, many people still think that there is a lot of money in the medical tourism market and that it is easy to earn money." This way of thinking may explain why purveyors of certification decide to set up shop, she suggested, adding: "Associations promoting and marketing medical tourism destinations, clusters, and individual medical service providers were founded, and a new occupational category of 'facilitators' was established. Mainly from these two fields, certifications are now offered for medical tourism players." Pollard told *MTR* that while there are some 'proper' certification programmes around, such as that offered by Temos, most of the medical tourism certificates available 'aren't worth the paper they are written on'. He continued: "Medical tourism is awash with





‘vanity certification’. Many providers buy certificates because they are cheap (relatively), it makes them look good and adds credibility to their marketing message.” However, he questioned whether the majority of certificates actually show any real medical tourism expertise: “They are ‘awarded’ for completing an online certification course or attending a half-day seminar or a session at a conference. Does this kind of certification actually benefit the patient? I doubt it. Managing international patient flows is a complex process [that] can’t be taught in a day.”

In its Guide to Medical Tourism Certification, The US-based Medical Travel Quality Alliance (MTQUA) warns that certification offered by some national medical tourism associations may not be of a high standard: “Several countries have their own national medical tourism associations and issue a certification to their members. This certification by a national

association is often more like a ‘better business’ registration than proof of excellence for medical tourists, and has a low bar for entry.” The goal of a national association, the MTQUA warns, is usually to promote the growth of medical tourism in that country. The MTQUA does provide a certification scheme of its own. Noting the increase in such programmes, Julie Munro, MTQUA president, said: “Yes, there is a growth in the number of programmes declaring themselves to be ‘certification’ programmes.

But it’s sometimes unclear what some of these programmes measure or certify.” She emphasised that a true medical tourism certification should be tailored to this industry, not simply be an assessment of the medical care provided: “For MTQUA, the distinction between clinical and non-clinical standards is clear, and has to be maintained. JCI, Accreditation Canada, QHA Trent, and the like, review and evaluate how well a medical institution performs against specific clinical standards. But clinical standards are not enough. While the goal of a medical intervention is to provide a good outcome, it is now recognised that non-clinical practices play a very important role in providing that good outcome.”

Pollard suggested that many organisations offering medical tourism certification do not themselves have any expertise in the industry: “In many cases, the individuals delivering the certification programmes have little real-world

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experience in healthcare or in medical tourism. It’s the partially sighted leading the blind. Ask one of the providers who is delivering the certification programme what their expertise is, [or] what their training qualification is, [and] you won’t get an answer.”

In medical tourism, Munro continued, non-clinical factors play an even more important role when it comes to assuring good outcomes. In fact, the MTQUA’s certification focuses specifically and exclusively on non-clinical practices in hospitals, clinics, treatment centres and medical travel companies. She explained: “These non-clinical practices include communication issues, privacy and security as well as safety issues. We review marketing practices and website structure and performance. In all, the MTQUA certification programme evaluates 10 or more non-clinical practices and processes that we believe affect outcomes for medical tourists.”

It’s worth noting that while we can discuss the current state of play, this is a rapidly moving industry, and although, as Munro highlighted, ‘there’s been a vacuum in standard setting for the medical tourism industry in the past decade’, there are now plenty of certification options for any person or entity involved in pretty much any aspect of the medical tourism industry, from a number of different industry bodies, certification companies, and award schemes.

### Sorting the wheat from the chaff

Choosing which code to follow, which certification process to embark on or which awards scheme to attach yourself to is a matter of individual choice, but great care should be taken in assessing any one course or certification programme for its merits. At the end of the day, in an industry where competition is as fierce as it is in the global medical tourism industry, certification options are a natural development. Those that stand up to real scrutiny and pass the test of time will be the ones worth their salt. While the old adage of caveat emptor applies to those selecting a medical tourism provider, then, it seems that providers shopping for certification should be just as wary. What’s needed, of course, is for someone to certify which of the certifiers is of good quality. I’ll be happy to oblige – please send used bank notes to my usual address to receive your certificate and rosette by return of post. ●