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With staff shortages, Brexit and a winter rush on clinics and hospitals, it makes sense for some expatriates to fly back to SA for surgery and even for routine medical care and check-ups

Michael Schmidt

WHY THE SICK FLY HOME

As a winter flu epidemic slows Britain's overburdened National Health Service (NHS) to a crawl, SA expats in the country are making special trips back home – not just for surgical procedures but even for routine dental and medical check-ups. In an October cover story last year, Jay Caboz of *Forbes Africa* noted that the medical tourism industry as a whole was estimated at £31.5bn-£50.5bn “and SA is sitting at the top table . . . The country has the advantage of good hospitals, English-speaking doctors and breath-taking landscapes.”

Medical experts have been warning for some time of a crisis in the UK's public health-care system, which was founded in 1948 to cope with post-war poverty.

While emergency admissions in Britain have risen 14% since 2010, a winter rush on clinics and hospitals caused by the gastroenteritis norovirus, nicknamed the “vomiting bug”, forced administrators to suspend 55,000 nonessential operations. Hospital corridors have been filling up, with patients on gurneys waiting for beds.

Despite a budget of almost £119bn – equivalent to 10% of the UK's GDP – and though it is the world's eighth-largest employer, with a permanent workforce of 1.3m, the service has about 40,000 vacant nursing posts.

Brexit and a tough new language test precipitated a 96% drop in medical staff from

the EU joining the UK register, while health unions warned that EU medics, nurses and midwives were leaving in droves; the loss was quantified in September as almost 10,000 staff in the 12 months to June. Previously, the EU had been a crucial source of Britain's young doctors and nurses.

The critical staff shortages are part of a vicious cycle, as Polly Toynbee of *The Guardian* warned last October; a survey showed that 44% of medical staff cited the stress of covering for absent colleagues as the reason for their own departure from the NHS.

The crisis impairs all levels of the service. Voice of America's Jamie Dettmer noted on January 8 that the “frontline NHS emergency departments are taking more of the strain as other services are cut, including walk-in clinics – 40% of which have been closed in recent years. The service is woefully short of family doctors and nurses, whose salaries have been cut.”

Faith Cartwright of Cape Town-based consultancy Medical Tourism SA, which represents a range of dentists and ophthalmologists, a cardiac surgeon, an audiologist, a fertility clinic, a hair-transplant specialist and a natural health-care practitioner, told the *Financial Mail* the NHS crisis had made SA an attractive option. “[There is a] 1:16 exchange rate; you can get some sunshine and a holiday, have your teeth done, undergo

a general check-up, go for a prostate test and maybe some botox; and then head off home and still have money in your pocket.”

Her consultancy does a lot of fertility work for UK citizens and SA expats living in the UK, because “there is an enormous NHS waiting list; by the time you are ready . . . your eggs [may be] past their expiry date.”

Another drawback for women wanting to fall pregnant was that in SA, unlike the UK, donors remain strictly anonymous. Cartwright says Cape Town is also a popular destination for patient-tourists needing orthopaedic work. And, for cardiac surgery, a mechanical heart that sells for £1m in the UK costs only R1m in SA.

Lorraine Melvill, founder and owner of Johannesburg-based Surgeon & Safari, says her business has moved away from cosmetic surgery towards general medical treatments. Though most patients come from Anglophone Africa, there is also a considerable number of SA expats working for multinationals in Africa who return home for treatment.

Medical tourism to SA was worth R961m in 2015, but Melvill says the data has not been updated and is skewed by the recording of patients' nationality rather than residency status. Yet numbers are rising, she says, and are expected to climb further if Brexit brings an end to the agreement that allows NHS patients to get discounts for certain procedures in Europe. **x**