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Crossing the border for dental care: Final Report



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Final Report
Crossing the border for dental care:
A case study examining dental tourism industry development in
Los Algodones, Mexico

Thank you so much for your participation in my research project entitled: *Crossing the border for dental care: A case study examining dental tourism industry development in Los Algodones, Mexico*. This research project was conducted as part of my PhD program from 2014 to 2017 and received ethics approval from the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, Canada.

This report provides participants with an overview of the project itself, key findings, possible policy implications of this work, and links to open access academic publications and other outputs developed from this research. The full dissertation developed for this project will be available from the SFU Library as of January, 2018. You can find this dissertation by searching my name (Krystyna Adams) on the [SFU library website](#). If you would like any further information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me at: kaa4@sfu.ca.

Sincerely,

Krystyna Adams
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Overview of the Research Project

The aim of this research project was to examine why dental tourism is occurring in Los Algodones and how industry development in this site is experienced by various industry stakeholders. My focus on Los Algodones' industry provides an interesting case study to examine possible factors driving medical tourism industry development more broadly and how these factors are shaping localized industry development. To gain insight into this phenomenon, there were three different components of this research project, each investigating the perspectives of different stakeholders in Los Algodones' dental tourism industry. First, I conducted interviews with representatives of provincial and national dental associations, dental schools, and patient advocacy organizations operating in Canada. These interviews included discussions on why Canadians might participate in dental tourism and the policy and health system contexts informing prospective dental tourists' decision-making. The findings from these interviews were developed into a publication for the Journal of the Canadian Dental Association, the journal produced by the professional dental association in Canada and read by many dentists and policymakers around the country. This publication is entitled: "The perfect storm": What's pushing Canadians abroad for dental care? This article is published in the October 2017 edition of this journal and can be accessed [here](#).

The second component of this project involved a review of media articles published in Canada and the United States (US) and discussing dental tourism in Los Algodones. Along

with my supervisory committee of professors at SFU, we reviewed 17 news articles and analyzed these articles based on the key narrative presented about the industry. The aim of this analysis was to highlight information potentially taken up by various industry stakeholders and informing their participation in the industry. The findings from this analysis were published in an academic journal, *The Journal of Borderlands Studies*. This journal is an interdisciplinary journal targeting a wide academic audience. While I cannot provide online access to this journal article, please contact me if you would like a copy of this paper sent directly to you.

Finally, I spent approximately 3 months living in Los Algodones and Arizona to learn more about the industry on the ground. During this time, I conducted interviews with 43 individuals living and/or working in Los Algodones and I participated in a range of informal conversations with snowbird visitors to the region, residents of both Los Algodones and Arizona, and government officials/ representatives on both sides of the Mexico-US border. I also immersed myself within the Latin American Studies program at the University of Arizona for 4 weeks to learn more about border health projects being investigated at this institution. Upon my return home, I analyzed transcripts from my interviews and field notes along with my supervisory committee to highlight key themes in the data. Overall, my research conducted in this environment resulted in the development of two academic publications. One of these papers has been published in the academic journal *Social Science & Medicine* and can be accessed [here](#). The other paper is currently in the process of being submitted to journals for review. Again, if you would like a copy of either of these papers, please let me know. All of the academic papers I have listed here are included in my final dissertation project available soon on the [SFU library website](#).

Key Findings

In this section, I will highlight key findings that emerged across all three components of this project. First of all, this research provides important insight into the social contexts shaping localized health care provision in Los Algodones' dental tourism industry. Specifically, this research highlights how systemic barriers to accessing dental care promote industry development in particular industry sites as patients from Canada and the US might seek alternative care options abroad and in easily accessible destinations (i.e., border towns). Furthermore, along with location near the Mexico-US border, I found that industry development in Los Algodones is highly informed by the economic context of the region. As an area predominately reliant on tourism for economic well-being, my research indicates that many government officials on both sides of the Mexico-US border supported the development of this industry through financial and promotional efforts. For example, the tourism bureau in Yuma, Arizona has provided information to snowbird visitors about the industry. The municipal government of Mexicali has also sent representatives to Los Algodones to work in a tourism office located at the border to provide tourists information about the town, including the dental tourism industry. Additionally, businesses operating as part of the industry in this site are encouraged/ supported by government in Mexico to protect the reputation of the industry site with security measures and aesthetic improvements.

Along with government support for the industry, this research suggests that industry development is highly informed by international businesses working in the global medical tourism industry. For example, many dental clinic employees indicated that dental tourists

often use services offered by patient facilitation companies when planning their care abroad. Many of the companies listed by research participants operate in Canada and the US as well as countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world, highlighting the truly international influence on localized industry practices. This research suggests that these companies play a considerable role in promoting particular industry sites on their websites and subsequently, encourage care providers working in the industry to pay these companies for patient recommendations. As a result, these companies are in a position of power and, as I argue in my dissertation, should be held responsible for promoting ethical industry practices through increased regulation of these companies. This research suggests that this regulation might be especially relevant for these international stakeholders given the highly competitive nature of the global medical tourism industry and the possibility that this competition could produce a race-to-the-bottom effect where different industry sites adjust their practices and pay facilitation companies more and more money to ensure these companies send patients their way. This race-to-the-bottom effect could have serious consequences for industry practices by encouraging the perpetuation of structural injustices such as poverty and tourism dependence.

Secondly, given the concerns I raised above regarding the competitive nature of this global industry, this research highlights how different industry stakeholders might experience the industry in response to this competition. For example, my interview discussions with numerous stakeholders living and working in Los Algodones suggest that efforts to protect the reputation of Los Algodones within the global medical tourism industry could drive wages down for some employees and produce unjust labour practices to promote the industry site as a place with easily accessible and more affordable care. Wages might be driven down to enable clinic owners to lower the costs of treatment or because profits are being diverted to patient facilitation companies and other businesses in a position of power in terms of directing patients to different sites. Furthermore, some industry employees in Los Algodones described how they worked extremely long hours with limited vacation time to meet the desires of patients for faster care. Employees also suggested that they have faced discrimination in the workplace as dental tourists have expected employees to meet unrealistic or even unsafe demands because the industry is located in Mexico and serving tourists from the global north. Furthermore, some clinic owners have encouraged their employees eliminate their accents when speaking and to work to distance Los Algodones from Mexico given the prejudiced assumptions from many dental tourists wrongfully depicting medical care in Mexico as necessarily inferior.

Overall, this research indicates that the dental tourism industry in Los Algodones serves a mutually beneficial purpose – patients from Canada and the US are able to access needed care they might have struggled to access back home while many industry stakeholders living and working in this industry site explained how much the industry has improved the economic situation. However, this research also indicates that even when the industry is mutually beneficial for the majority of industry stakeholders, there still might be reason for concern regarding industry practices, and particularly if elite industry stakeholders such as patient facilitation companies are encouraging or enabling unjust labour conditions and discriminatory practices. I argue that many of the industry practices I highlighted above raise health equity concerns for the global medical tourism industry if competition for customers and prejudiced assumptions from particular industry stakeholders enable industry practices with negative impacts on the health of particular industry stakeholders. This research

highlights how some stakeholders including low wage workers, migrant workers, and/or marginalized groups employed in dental labs, clinics, and other affiliated businesses might be particularly vulnerable to industry abuses and experience the industry in ways that have negative implications on their health.

Policy Implications/ Future Research Directions

This section provides key ideas for policy development in response to my research findings. I have currently disseminated my research findings in academic publications; conference presentations (i.e., the conference for the Society of Applied Anthropology; The Canadian Association of Geographers); and presentations at the Yuma Regional Hospital and University of Arizona. I have primarily communicated three policy considerations and/or ideas for future research on this topic as part of this knowledge dissemination:

- This research indicates that there is a need for more regulation of the industry and particularly regulation of professional groups with significant power in the global medical tourism industry. I believe that patient facilitation companies have particular responsibility to promote more ethical industry practices, and as such, warrant greater scrutiny and regulation to ensure these companies are meeting their responsibilities. This regulation should be developed and enforced by an international body and focus on regulating the ways in which facilitation companies are paid and the types of information they provide to dental tourists (i.e., does this information perpetuate prejudiced assumptions about different places around the world?).
- Dental tourists themselves also have a responsibility to participate in the industry in ways that respect other individuals interacting with the industry and the well-being of employees enabling their care provision. I believe there is a need for more information available to prospective dental tourists, particularly given that much of the media coverage on this phenomenon seemingly ignores ethical concerns for the industry highlighted in this research. This information should focus on providing prospective dental tourists with information about how to engage in the industry in the most ethical manner possible. While this research did not consider what might be entailed in this information specifically and how this information should be delivered, this research does highlight the types of information that should be better communicated to this stakeholder group to promote ethical industry development.
- Finally, to develop better regulatory frameworks promoting more ethical medical tourism activities, I believe that there is a need for better coordination across health care systems. This research indicates that patient mobility or the movement of patients for health care could help fill the gaps in health systems. However, this mobility could also exacerbate health inequities if only some patients are able to access this care and the provision of care via the industry has negative health implications for marginalized populations. Countries should develop bi-lateral or multi-lateral regulatory frameworks to ensure this mobility does not have negative implications on health equity.

I will be working to further develop my research findings into media articles and commentaries read by both health policymakers in Canada and the general public. I hope that the publication of these articles and commentaries will inform the development of

interventions and policy aimed at mitigating negative health equity impacts of medical tourism practices while encouraging ethical engagement in the industry from a range of industry stakeholders.

Further information

Please contact me if you would like any further information about this project. I am happy to send you any academic articles. You can also find a compilation of publications, reports, and other research activities on [our website](#). This webpage provides a list of publications (with links) for work developed by myself as well as other members of the Simon Fraser University Medical Tourism Research Group. On this site, you can find information about a variety of research projects examining this topic and providing policy recommendations to encourage ethical industry development. I will add links on this website for any new published commentaries or reports drawing on this research so keep checking back for new publications.