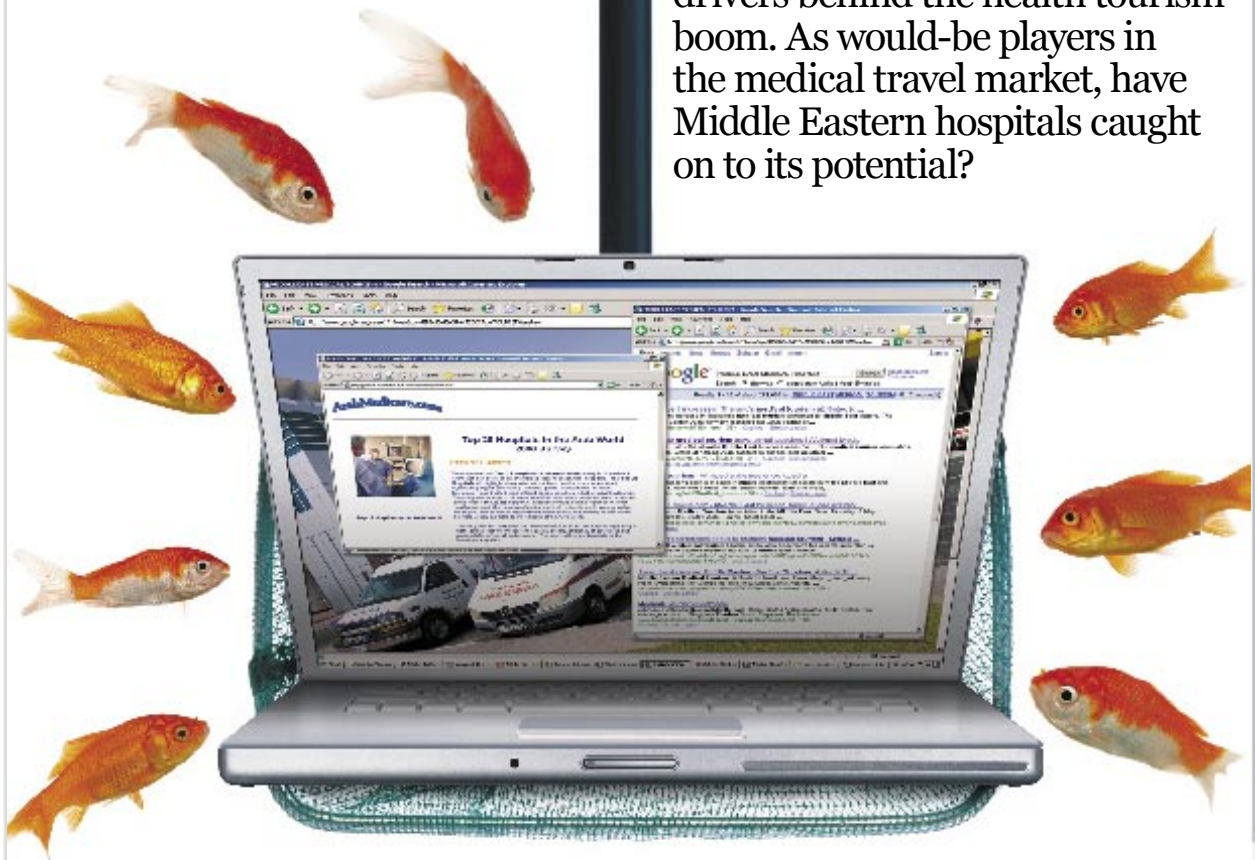


The internet is one of the biggest drivers behind the health tourism boom. As would-be players in the medical travel market, have Middle Eastern hospitals caught on to its potential?



CASTING YOUR NET

The Internet has a reputation for bargains. Sites like ebay, last-minute.com and pricechecker.com are bookmarked on any penny-pincher's browser. Howev-

er, the luxury of trawling thriftily through competitor's prices has not traditionally stretched to patients in need of medical care. But the rising costs of healthcare have seen many

patients - particularly the uninsured - priced out of their local market. For those looking for a cheaper alternative, the first stop on the search is the internet. And now that the frugal have turned to Google, their interest is helping to fuel one of the most hotly tipped industries in healthcare: medical tourism.

"If you think about the typical medical tourist, if there is such a thing, then it is someone in their 50s and not necessarily a big internet user," points out David E. Williams of US-based MedPharma Partners LLC and author of medical travel blog medtripinfo.com. These silver surfers are keen to trade tourism tips, and are

helping to create an online community that offers independent advice to would-be health tourists. "If they go to the trouble to discover all of the facets of going abroad to have a procedure done then they have generated a lot of information," he suggests. "They should be willing to share it with their peers and I wanted to create a forum for that"

Before Williams started his blog, many of the medical tourism sites were commercially orientated. By starting medtripinfo, Williams hopes to foster some of the tenets of web 2.0 (web-based communities designed to facilitate collaboration) as users help to create a database of non-sponsored opinion. "Older people do tend to use the internet more than is realised - it is just they don't tend to use it for the web 2.0 applications, but I think that will change," he predicts. "I think we will see more interactivity and medical tourists will be able to stay in much better contact with people at home."

MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

The Middle East has grand ambitions when it comes to medical tourism. A report by the Abu Dhabi Chamber of commerce and Industry (ADCCI) optimistically maintains the United Arab Emirates will pocket AED7 billion annually in medical tourism profits by 2010. Yet to the burgeoning online medical tourism community, the region remains largely invisible. Laura Carabello is the publisher and managing editor of e-newsletter *Medical Travel Today*. Established only six months ago, the newsletter has over 20,000 subscribers internationally.

Surprisingly, Carabello states that *Medical Times* is the first credible source from the region to contact the newsletter. This is symptomatic of the lack of marketing weight behind the Middle East, reasons Carabello: "Everybody is building beautiful

facilities for medical tourism but they haven't spent anywhere near what they need to spend on marketing." Carabello accuses governments in the region of underestimating what a dogfight the global healthcare market has become and how important a role the Internet has to play.

"I think they are looking at the market with rose-coloured glasses and

“The hardest thing in getting the big hospitals involved has been getting them to understand online advertising.”



they need to take them off, deepen their pockets and spend on marketing, not just the facilities," she argues. "If foreign governments think they can just come to the US and tell people to come to their country next week for a hip replacement then it is not going to happen."

A concerted online marketing campaign might be a tough sell to Middle Eastern providers, who are used to the more traditional mediums of print and trade shows, but institutions wary of the Internet, which Carabello describes as "the primary vehicle for medical tourism," risk missing out on the market's most valuable advertising real estate.

MONEY WELL SPENT

Carabello's comments are echoed

by Sparrow Mahoney, CEO of *medcaltourism.com*. The site matches patients with providers and was one of the Internet's first dedicated medical tourism portals. Mahoney argues that most providers in the Middle East are failing to grasp the benefits of digital marketing. "I think the hardest thing in getting the big hospitals involved has been getting them to understand online advertising," she says. "We find that they will balk at the price of the membership and yet spend twice that amount for one trade show - it is not a creative industry and I think that hospitals believe as long as they have a website up they will be alright."

Mahoney is keen to avoid being lumped into the same bracket as other commercially-driven sites, although she admits that the business plan did need some tweaking. "We looked at the industry and saw a number of online agencies out there....who are set up with certain hotels and hospitals and take a commission when they supply a patient," she notes. "Our goal is to be an online independent site that is free for users just to find the best medical providers around the world."

This meant distancing the site from its original format, which was more blog than patient-portal. "In its first encryption it had hundreds and hundreds of users, but I think the problem with that was as a publication for medical information you have to be very careful about what you allow people to post," she reasons. "How do you make recommendations without creating liability? And there were people that were very hard to keep out, so it just became more trouble than it was worth."

The website now has over 600 subscribing members and is proof that the Internet has plenty of value to offer both patients and providers in the great medical tourism race. [MT](#)