

Title

Travels cost savings from a regional plastic surgery service: A patient centred evaluation

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Abstract

Purpose: Access to specialist healthcare in regional and rural settings is often limited. One of the benefits of a regional plastic surgery service is to reduce the travel costs associated with accessing this care. Our aim was to evaluate the potential savings in travel costs for patients who accessed our service in south west Victoria.

Methods: We conducted a retrospective evaluation of our patients who underwent an operation at our rural plastic surgery service between July 2019 and June 2021 inclusive. We evaluated costs using government metrics for travel, and availability and cost for local accommodation options, as well as our previous data on patient accommodation preferences. Distances were calculated from participants usual place of residence and our healthcare service compared to the closest metropolitan service. Costs covered a whole episode of care including a preoperative assessment (if elective), travel for surgery and a single postoperative visit.

Results: We included 1860 patients in our study (1380 emergency and 480 elective operations) from a single hospital. Total additional personal cost of travel and accommodation to our patients if they had to travel to a metropolitan service over a two-year period was \$1,707,740. Median travel distance was 28 km to our service compared to 259 km to the nearest metropolitan service ($p < 0.001$). Median travel costs for patients to our health service was \$97, compared to \$1,088 for travel to a metropolitan service ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: There is significant increased in personal cost for travel and accommodation required for rural patients to access specialist care in the absence of a regional plastic surgery service.

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