

## Travel medicine: Travelling to space and the reality on the ground

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The tourism industry has been among the hardest hit global industry and most damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic causing an estimated loss of about 2.89 trillion US dollars.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there are already signs of recovery. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) reported that international tourism experienced a 4% increase in 2021 although the international arrivals were still 72% below the pre-pandemic year of 2019. According to the latest UNWTO Panel of Experts, most tourism professionals (61%) see better prospects for 2022 but the majority of experts (64%) now expect international arrivals to return to 2019 levels only in 2024 or later ([www.unwto.org](http://www.unwto.org)).

Malaysians just love to travel. Before the pandemic, R Hirschman in his report on the number of outbound trips dated 9 August 2019 ([www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)), estimated that 11.9 million outbound trips were made by Malaysians in 2016. He continued by stating that Malaysians love to travel, and despite a sluggish economy and weak currency compared to the US dollar, the number of outbound travellers from Malaysia is increasing. This appears to be supported by Malaysian government statistics. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal (accessed on March 24, 2022), before the pandemic, the outbound tourism expenditure by Malaysians showed a steady increase from RM31.1 billion in 2015 to RM44.8 billion in 2019. Fauziah Ismail in her article published on January 9, 2019 in the New Straits Times, also supported the contention that Malaysians just love to travel, despite complaining about rising prices of essential items in the country and the plummeting Ringgit value against most major world currencies. Cheap air travel with innovative business strategies and attractive taglines such as “Now everyone can fly” by AirAsia, the low-cost air carrier, greatly facilitate this love to travel.

Leisure travel trips are planned for the purpose of recreation, entertainment, and relaxation. And all these can only be achieved when you travel in good health. Good health does not necessarily mean healthy with no disease or ailment. Individuals with chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and even cancer can still achieve reasonably good health to enjoy travelling. To enjoy the trip, the traveller must also understand and appreciate the risk to their health and safety associated with the travel. This is where travel medicine has an important role to play in ensuring travellers achieve the purpose of their travel.

Travel medicine is practised by family physicians, specialised travel clinics or vaccination centres. It is an interdisciplinary field involving travel related fields of epidemiology, disease prevention, and self-treatment. The primary goal is to keep travellers alive and healthy through minimising the impact of illness and accident through preventive measures and self-treatment.<sup>2</sup> Travelers need to appreciate the risk to their health and well-being throughout the travel and the travel medicine practitioner's role is to help guide their patient/client to understand and manage those risks.

Traditionally, the mainstay of travel medicine includes the following<sup>2</sup>:

- Information, mainly of the 3 Fs, with the goal of behaviour modification – Food/beverage, Flies/mosquitoes, and Flirtation/unprotected sex.
- Immunisation by required and recommended vaccines, for example many countries have regulated mandatory entry requirement for yellow fever vaccination.
- Chemoprophylaxis, especially the risk against malaria, and
- Self-treatment especially for traveller's diarrhoea.

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Now, with non-communicable diseases (NCD) being so prevalent, the scope of travel medicine has also expanded beyond the traditional “tropical medicine”. There is a growing appreciation of the NCD and injury burden in travellers. In a study among last minute travellers, a large proportion of them were found to have pre-existing medical conditions especially NCD.<sup>3</sup> Inadequate assessment of their NCD status may put them at higher risk of ill health during their travel, thus compromising the goals of the travel itself.

People are now talking about space travel. Gerard Flaherty has written a letter to the editor about that in this issue of the IeJSME<sup>4</sup> but where are we with regards to travel medicine and travellers’ health in Malaysia and in this region? The fact is that there is very limited literature about the subject in this country. And the little that is published revealed the poor state of knowledge, attitude, and practice about this discipline. In one study among 316 outbound travellers at Malaysian international airports, only 40.5% sought pre-travel advice and of these, only 12.5% sought it from physicians. The rest were from friends (39.8%) and the internet (36.2%).<sup>5</sup> Another study showed a much lower proportion (36.8%) who sought pre-travel health advice but this time mostly

(64.7%) from their doctor. It also revealed a risk-taking behaviour – 40% were uninsured and 50% do not know how to access medical care when overseas.<sup>6</sup> Another study among community pharmacists to understand their role in the provision of travel medicine advice revealed other interesting findings. Most respondents (82%) were not trained in travel medicine and graduates from foreign universities possessed significantly higher knowledge score than the locally trained graduates.<sup>7</sup> It may not be surprising since travel medicine is generally not incorporated into the curriculum, both for medicine and pharmacy courses in this country.

The need for travel medicine services in the country is huge if measured by the number of outbound travellers. However, awareness about the need, both among the client and service provider, is very much lacking. Access to travel medicine education at primary care level is also very limited. Thus, the efforts of the International Medical University and National University of Ireland, Galway to organise the world’s first holistic Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in travel medicine for the undergraduates, which was piloted before the pandemic in 2019, is an effort to address this gap.<sup>8</sup>

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