

# A Travel Clinic in Your Office: Grow Your Practice and Protect International Travelers

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**M**edical practices today face economic challenges from declining reimbursements and rising overhead costs. Physicians need to develop new income sources to invigorate their practices and remain viable. Travel medicine—advising and immunizing international travelers—is a rapidly growing specialty in the United States that generates substantial cash reimbursements and professional satisfaction. Travel Clinics of America, a physician-operated company, specializes in helping physicians to incorporate travel medicine into their existing practices.

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Travel medicine could be just the “shot in the arm” that physician practices need today. Travel health is a huge growth industry. The demand for pre-travel counseling and immunizations for Americans traveling abroad has risen steadily over the years. The Office of Travel and Tourism reports that 64 million U.S. residents traveled abroad in 2007.<sup>1</sup> Twenty million of them traveled to neighboring Mexico, many of whom wished they had seen a travel doctor before their trip. In the same year, over 30 million people headed overseas, an increase of 10 million travelers since 1997. Twenty-nine percent of these overseas travelers journeyed to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, regions that have a host of infectious diseases and safety issues that threaten international travelers.<sup>2</sup> Millions of these folks neglected to arrange a pre-departure consultation with a travel physician. Many of them suffered medical illnesses and other misadventures that were entirely preventable. Going abroad without medical advice is like driving without a seatbelt. You might reach your destination safely, but why risk catastrophe?

Physicians have an outstanding opportunity to expand their practices by entering the growing and untapped market of travel health. Millions of travelers need immunizations and advice before their trips. They often need multiple vaccinations. They need prescriptions for medication and advice on how to prevent malaria and other infectious illnesses. They need information about food and beverage safety. They need to know *before* their trip how to find competent medical care abroad. They need a travel doctor at home who can make all of this happen.

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This medical specialty is no longer the exclusive territory of infectious disease doctors. Many family physicians and general internists now view travel medicine as the opportunity they have been waiting for to invigorate their practices. It’s an enjoyable professional diversion, and it’s a cash business.

Consider the market. Over 10 million Americans each year *should* be receiving pre-travel advice and vaccinations,

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but the majority of them never do so. Many of them are unaware of the need for counseling and immunizations. Physicians should view the huge population of international travelers as a powerful practice stimulant. Doctors who incorporate this niche specialty into their existing practices accomplish two important objectives—they add profit to their practices and they protect the health of international travelers.

Two decades ago, physicians never considered providing ancillary medical services, as there was no need to do so. Medical incomes then were sufficient and stable. Unfortunately, that era is gone forever. New physicians would be surprised to learn that Medicare was once considered a poor payer in comparison to private insurance carriers. Today, Medicare's low rates are among the physicians' best carriers.

In February 2009, *American Medical News* reported physician and health-plan executive survey results indicating that most physicians' offices anticipate staff and service cutbacks as a consequence of the current economic recession.<sup>3</sup> For many physicians, cash flow has fizzled to a trickle or even disappeared. These new economic challenges are in addition to all of the existing financial obstacles that physicians have been confronting for years. Insurance company reimbursements steadily shrink while overhead expenses rise yearly. As long as this dynamic persists, physicians will be forced to retire prematurely or to accept employment in large hospital-owned physician networks.

Physicians need to find new ways to earn money. The \$787 billion government stimulus package signed into law in February 2009 will bail out many banks and financial institutions, but it doesn't offer a dime to stabilize physician practices. Doctors will have to rescue themselves.

Physicians, particularly those in private practice, need new strategies to remain viable. While reducing expenses and maximizing efficiencies are critical, physicians need to be entrepreneurial and innovative as they pursue new income streams. Working harder at the same routine is not a formula for success. If you're deep in a hole, you don't continue to dig or buy a bigger shovel. Practices that stay in place will soon find that they are submerged by hostile economic tides. In contrast, successful practices actively seek out new income sources. Many of them now provide services that they would not have contemplated even five years ago. Primary care physicians today, for example, are performing cosmetic surgery, cardiac stress tests, urologic evaluations, bone density testing; providing complementary medicine; and even dispensing prescription medications. Concierge practices are opening throughout the country to convert conventional medical practices into cash businesses. Thriving medical practices, like any successful business, must be nimble enough to adapt to changing markets. Doctors must be willing to step over their comfort boundaries into new and unfamiliar terrain.

Travel medicine can deliver financial growth and stability to physician practices. Travel Clinics of America (TCA) is a new company that offers doctors an easy and enjoyable pathway to boost practice income. It is physician-founded and -operated and is growing rapidly throughout the country. Its mission is to improve physician practices and to protect international travelers.

The company has created a national network of participating physicians who have incorporated travel medicine into their existing practices. The company offers its members medical training and step-by-step guidance in all necessary office set-up procedures. TCA will train its members in all of the medical and business aspects of the specialty including medical training, billing and pricing, vaccine purchasing, yellow fever certification, patient education, and office equipment. The company's leadership also works directly with physicians to market their practices on national and local levels.

***Travel Clinics of America, founded and operated by physicians, has the expertise and the resources to establish a travel clinic in a doctor's office quickly and easily.***

TCA has the expertise and the resources to establish a travel clinic in a doctor's office quickly and easily. It would be daunting for busy individual practitioners or physician groups to accomplish this on their own. In addition, belonging to the TCA network brings all participants the benefits of negotiating as a large group with vaccine manufacturers and other vendors. TCA is not a franchise. Participating physicians continue to practice independently and make their own business decisions that best serve their practices' needs.

Most importantly from a business standpoint, travel medicine is a cash business as these services are generally not covered by insurance. It takes just a few travelers per week to dramatically increase a practice's revenue. TCA has created a comprehensive Web site, [www.travelclinicsofamerica.com](http://www.travelclinicsofamerica.com), to educate physicians and the traveling public. This site, with zip code search capability, is one mechanism that directs travelers to member physicians.

TCA's physician leaders recognize how cost-conscious doctors must be today. The company's strategy was designed to encourage physician participation by minimizing the costs. For that reason, there is absolutely no fee to join the network. The minimal start-up costs include office Internet access, a credit card processor, and a refrigerator dedicated to vaccine storage—items that many practices already have. The costs of the newly created online training are comparable to standard medical education courses. Ongoing support and guidance from the company's leadership is provided at no charge. The company takes a small percentage of the physician's travel billings to run TCA.

Travel medicine has brought financial relief and professional satisfaction to physician practices across the country. It is easy to learn and is a welcome diversion for doctors and their staffs who enjoy meeting interesting travelers who are bound for exotic locations. Fortunately for physicians, the market for these medical services is growing and is underserved. Physicians who have been searching and struggling to energize their practices should give serious consideration to this opportunity. TCA can help practices recapture their potential with minimal cost and risk.

Physicians and international travelers are in a similar situation today. Both groups are vulnerable and must take precautions to stay safe and avoid danger. Physicians and travelers can help each other to survive and prosper. TCA takes both physicians and travelers on a journey to safer ground. This is a trip that many doctors today should have on their professional itineraries. ■

*Physician recruitment at Travel Clinics of America is actively in progress. Practice managers and physicians are encouraged to contact the company through the Web site [www.travelclinicsofamerica.com](http://www.travelclinicsofamerica.com) or by e-mail at [mkirschmd@gmail.com](mailto:mkirschmd@gmail.com).*

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