# Uk nurses warn of superbug surge linked to cosmetic surgery abroad



Nurses in the UK are sounding alarm bells over the rising incidence of antibiotic-resistant infections, which they attribute to an influx of patients returning from cosmetic surgeries abroad. Recent reports indicate that NHS hospitals have witnessed a concerning 30 per cent rise in cases of such infections, which can have dire consequences if they penetrate the bloodstream. The issue has become increasingly pronounced as more individuals opt for cheaper surgical options overseas, typically in countries like Turkey and various Eastern European nations, in light of lengthy NHS waiting lists and prohibitive costs for domestic procedures.

A report by the British Medical Journal highlighted a striking trend: approximately 5,000 patients underwent weight-loss surgeries abroad in 2024, surpassing the 4,500 procedures conducted by the NHS in the previous year. With NHS waiting times for weight-loss surgery extending up to four years, patients are becoming disillusioned, often turning to social media promotions for all-inclusive surgical "holiday packages." At a recent Royal College of Nursing annual conference, it was revealed that the standard of infection control in many non-EU clinics can be alarmingly lax compared to UK standards, heightening risks for patients.

Nykoma Hamilton, an infection control nurse from Fife, Scotland, articulated the growing apprehensions within the nursing community. She noted an increase in patients returning home colonised with extensively drug-resistant organisms, particularly carbapenem-resistant bacteria, which she described as the “absolute granddaddy of resistance.” The situation has prompted concerns about the entire healthcare system, as returning patients often exhibit horrific wounds, severe infections, and even sepsis.

One stark example shared by Nicola Smith, a district nurse from Slough, involved a young woman who sought skin removal surgery abroad following significant weight loss. Just weeks post-surgery, the patient's thigh wound was barely closed and tissue was dying, with the woman developing sepsis. Smith remarked on the tragic irony of the woman being more focused on the luxury of her recovery hotel than the grave complications of her post-operative care. “It’s really sad as this procedure was sold to her like a holiday package,” Smith said. “A hotel is lovely, but it’s no place to be when you're in pain, when there's an infection.”

The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons has echoed these concerns, warning about increasing instances of patients returning with treatment-resistant bacteria, thereby not only endangering themselves but also the wider public. Indeed, recent statistics from the UK Health Security Agency reveal that the number of antibiotic-resistant infections has surged by 7 per cent before the pandemic, instigating fears about a potential "post-antibiotic era." Projections estimate that drug-resistant infections could lead to 10 million deaths annually by 2050, raising significant alarms about the future of medical safety.

Nurses have voiced the need for better information for patients considering overseas surgery, emphasising that while individuals should have the freedom to choose where to undergo treatment, they must be equipped with the knowledge to evaluate the safety and quality of clinics. Some have suggested that foreign clinics should offer insurance policies to cover complications, enabling the NHS to reclaim costs incurred by the treatment of patients who fall victim to inadequate care abroad.

The rising trend of medical tourism complicates an already strained NHS. Health Secretary Wes Streeting has cautioned individuals to "think very carefully" before seeking treatment overseas, underscoring the burden placed on the NHS as it grapples with the fallout of these decisions.

As the landscape of healthcare continues to evolve, the prevalence of superbugs and antibiotic-resistant infections poses a formidable challenge. Comprehensive strategies to enhance global infection control standards, improved patient education, and robust public health responses are critical to combat this ominous trend that, if unchecked, threatens to reverse the substantial medical advances of recent decades.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14714667/Warning-deadly-superbug-UK-cosmetic-surgery-abroad.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
2. Paragraphs 5, 6, and 8: [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/antibiotic-resistant-infections-continue-to-rise)
3. Paragraph 3: [[3]](https://journals.asm.org/doi/full/10.1128/spectrum.05185-22)
4. Paragraphs 4 and 5: [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/antibiotic-resistant-infections-and-associated-deaths-increase)
5. Paragraph 6: [[5]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9710160/)
6. Paragraph 6: [[6]](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2024/posttravel-evaluation/antimicrobial-resistance)
7. Paragraph 8: [[7]](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2933358/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14714667/Warning-deadly-superbug-UK-cosmetic-surgery-abroad.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/antibiotic-resistant-infections-continue-to-rise> - In 2023, the UK Health Security Agency reported an estimated 66,730 serious antibiotic-resistant infections, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. The majority of these bloodstream infections were caused by E. coli, a common cause of urinary tract infections, diarrhoea, vomiting, and fever. Antibiotic-resistant bacteria are less likely to respond to treatment, leading to serious complications such as bloodstream infections, sepsis, and hospitalisation. Individuals with antibiotic-resistant infections are more likely to die within 30 days compared to those with antibiotic-sensitive infections.
3. <https://journals.asm.org/doi/full/10.1128/spectrum.05185-22> - A study published in Microbiology Spectrum examined the impact of international travel on the acquisition of antimicrobial resistance determinants. The research found that travelers returning to the UK had an increased abundance of antibiotic resistance genes in their gut microbiota, particularly after visiting regions with high antimicrobial resistance burdens. The study highlighted that experiencing diarrhoea during travel and taking antibiotics were significant risk factors for acquiring resistant organisms. The findings underscore the importance of infection prevention and control measures for travelers to reduce the spread of antibiotic resistance.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/antibiotic-resistant-infections-and-associated-deaths-increase> - The UK Health Security Agency reported a 4% increase in antibiotic-resistant infections in England in 2022, with an estimated 58,224 cases compared to 55,792 in 2021. Deaths due to severe antibiotic-resistant infections also rose from 2,110 in 2021 to 2,202 in 2022. The data indicates a reversal in the previous decline of antibiotic use, with total prescribing rising by 8.4% in 2022 compared to 2021, although it remains below 2019 pre-pandemic levels.
5. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9710160/> - A case report published in the Journal of Travel Medicine describes a 23-year-old American woman who developed a multidrug-resistant Mycobacterium abscessus infection following cosmetic surgery in the Dominican Republic. The patient experienced severe abdominal pain, pruritus, and boils on her back two weeks after the procedure. The report highlights the risks associated with medical tourism, particularly in low-resource settings, and emphasizes the importance of infection prevention and control measures to reduce the risk of acquiring resistant organisms during travel.
6. <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2024/posttravel-evaluation/antimicrobial-resistance> - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides guidance on the risks of acquiring antimicrobial-resistant organisms during international travel. Patients admitted to healthcare facilities outside the United States, especially in low- and middle-income countries, may be at greater risk due to higher prevalence of these organisms and differences in infection-control standards. The CDC recommends that travelers choose facilities with active infection-prevention and control programs and be aware of the potential risks associated with healthcare abroad.
7. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2933358/> - A study published in the Journal of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy investigated the emergence of a new antibiotic resistance mechanism, NDM-1, in India, Pakistan, and the UK. The research found that several UK patients had undergone elective, including cosmetic, surgery while visiting India or Pakistan. The study warns against the potential global spread of NDM-1-producing bacteria and advises against proposals for UK patients to seek corrective surgery in these countries, as it may ultimately cost the NHS substantially more than the short-term savings.