There is a long history of travelling to foreign countries in order to receive healthcare, a number of countries around the world position themselves in order to attract visitors for specific specialisations that the region is often known for. Oftentimes these countries are able to offer more accessible, less expensive and a more luxurious experience. Several Caribbean nations, such as Cuba, Barbados, Jamaica and Puerto Rico have been a part of this growing form of tourism.

The outsourcing of medical procedures to a foreign country, is often seen due to the prohibitively expensive cost of healthcare in the US, a growing number of American patients are travelling abroad for healthcare in search of less expensive and often more luxurious health care. “While the United States has long been a destination for relatively affluent patients from other countries, more recently it has become an exporter of patients” 1

It is important to note that there is a difference between health and medical tourism. Medical tourism deemed by Cornell is described as “... specifically involves ‘medical interventions’, as opposed to the more general concept of medical tourism which includes anything related to health and medical tourism both fall under healthcare, as they improve or maintain the health of a patient through prevention, diagnosis, treatment or by providing care to a person’s physical or mental ailments. This medical tourism has also created a market for ancillary services, often by providing a high end service, the patient is guided through a maze of choices while providing support at key moments of the process, like transportation or outpatient care.

A way that both forms of healthcare are being marketed and sold in order to be more palatable towards foreigners outside of the Caribbean brings up the exoticism and natural beauty of the Caribbean region. This is a tactic that has been used in the past and is still used today.

An unique existing example of the colonial past of healthcare tourism in the Caribbean exists in Nevis. In the late 1770s, a hot spring located in Bath, a small village on the island near the southern end of Galloway Bay, was discovered by the British. An aristocrat named John Huggings then built the first hotel ever built in the Caribbean11 adjacent to the natural spring in 1778. Due to its purported health benefits, the spring water was said to contain minerals of medicinal value and is known to have cured rheuma-
gious and gout. At the time, Nevis was the most popular island in the Caribbean for white people and the hotel was seen to be a “fashionable health resort” 12. As more people visited the springs the number of people who learned of the health benefits did as well. “In England he had learnt of several people having been ‘cured of the Leprosy’ and Harcourt added further evidence of the water’s health-giving powers. He attested to one of his party saving his hand from a severe gunpowder burn by ‘twice or thrice washing and bathing it’ while it took only a day for other men to heal their swollen legs. As to his own experience, he was ‘speedily cured’ of an extreme cough ‘by bathing in the bath, and drinking from the water’” 13. Notable dignitaries were recorded to have visited the attraction, including Lord Nelson, Samuel Taylor Colledge, and Prince William Henry.

The architect had built the hotel out of stone, a material commonly used in the home country and other colonial territories at the time. Due to its sturdy nature, it withstood earthquakes, hurricanes for centuries. The design of the hotel had stone corridors, with wide verandas that would allow for the cool breeze to enter the interior rooms with lofty vaulted ceilings, allowing spacious rooms to feel airy. The verandas frames the view of the sea, and the town, and the whole length of St. Kitts, allowing the visitor to have unobstructed views of the lush greenery that the island has to offer. The hotel continued to be a popular destination for tourists 14.

Looking at the other side of medical tourism in the Caribbean, many American and Canadian students are the target recruits for Caribbean medical schools. Interestingly, a similar demographic to the tourism industry that the region serves. Some major benefits to completing your medical school training in the Caribbean include a higher acceptance rate compared to American and Canadian medical schools and less of a financial strain. Another very useful pull factor that recruits will use is the geographic location and environmental benefits. The touristic discourse and images of these ‘offshore’ medical school websites are often used to highlight the beauty of the Caribbean region. These

websites will have a photo gallery of white sandy beaches and sunsets, alongside classrooms and laboratories in order to convey and situate the ‘caribbean aesthetic’ in a healthcare setting.

As the American University of Antigua College of Medicine put it: “Location is surprisingly a lot more important than you think. When you’re studying medicine in Connecticut, you’re probably not thinking about brutal winters or having to dig your car out of the snow. At a Caribbean medical school, you’ll be studying in a tropical paradise and that means no worries about crazy weather fluctuations. Seriously, winter is the worst.” Incredibly, in addition to creating the image of a tropical paradise the school continues to then sell the typical amenities that are targeted towards tourists by highlighting the proximity the school was to touristic amenities and attractions.

As the previous cases suggests, medical tourism whether it be targeted towards potential clients or to future healthcare workers, is clearly targeted towards a specific non local demographic. This could have potential negative impacts on the Caribbean people. The fear of having financial and medical resources be diverted to foreigners who have the ability to pay a large amount of money.

As time goes on, these offshore healthcare facilities continue to grow in popularity and attract those who are looking for more accessible, cheaper or more luxurious medical procedures. We must identify the issues that medical tourism could bring up. Both the stakeholders and consumers must look beyond the marketing images of sandy beaches, crystal blue waters and open verandahs that promote a holistic approach of medical care and delve more deeply in the conversations about the healthcare system that allows for such care to exist.

Figure 3. Photo showing the back of La Pradera, a health care centre, La Pradera. 1857. Trip Advisor.

Figure 4. Picture of Beachide view from high end resort, depicting popularised image of medical tourism. https://equityhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1475-9276-9-24/figures/1.