

One last trip: When tourism embraces the terminally ill

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Travel helps terminally ill cancer patients create unforgettable memories with their families. Credit: Jude Beck on Unsplash

Since the latter half of the 20th century, vacationing has grown increasingly synonymous with tourism. This has been attributed to disposable incomes rising for many people, budget commercial airlines taking to the sky, and multitudes of tour facilitators entering the market,

among other things. Now, economies of entire countries depend on tourism. To quote the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO): "Today, the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products, or automobiles."

Yet, there have been entire communities of people who do not have the luxury to partake in tourism—for monetary, psychological, cultural, or bureaucratic constraints. Social tourism provides these communities the opportunity to fulfill their vacation desires. But according to Professor Jin Young Chung from Incheon National University, Korea, not all such disadvantaged communities are able to make the most of social tourism. Talking about his paper recently published in the *Annals of Tourism Research* (made available online on 31 October 2019 and offline in the September 2020 issue), he says: "There exists a hidden population who could benefit from social tourism but tend not to participate at all."

Prof Chung is referring to families in which a parent is battling cancer and is terminally ill. Often buried under brutal treatment regimens, the burden of bills, and low morale, these families cannot see vacation as a priority. However, Prof Chung's research tells us that they need a vacation.

Prof Chung and his colleague Prof Steven Simpson of the University of Wisconsin analyzed notes written by approximately 400 such families after they had benefitted from a social tourism program run by a non-profit charitable organization in the US.

"I don't think any of us knew how much we needed a break from all the doctor's appointments..." one [family](#) said. "...one of the first thoughts I got was how do I spend as much time as I can with my kids making good memories to last them a lifetime?" a mother had written. Because of this social tourism program, the families had recognized their latent tourism need.

"The most important memory was seeing my daughter's eyes light up and the sound of her laughter," wrote another parent. The trip had gotten families to realize that there were precious benefits to this vacation. Not only did it take them away from the worries of daily life and treatment, it brought them closer and left positive mental impressions on the children.

Several notes also made it clear that these realizations would not have come to fruition if their medical or social points of contact, such as nurses and social workers, had not nudged them to consider the social tourism program. "Public health professionals and [health clinics](#) should consider educating oncologists and [social workers](#) on the importance of travel and leisure programs for families with a terminally ill cancer parent, where the parent is preparing to leave their children behind and whose families are preparing to live life without them," Prof Chung reiterates.

Researchers of tourism mobility and organizations such as the UNWTO care about making tourism sustainable and accessible for all. But this analysis by Profs Chung and Simpson brings to the fore the fact that hidden communities exist who remain excluded from such focus. It is time research is done to unearth them and understand their needs, so [tourism](#) can one day truly become accessible for all.

More information: Jin Young Chung et al, Social tourism for families with a terminally ill parent, *Annals of Tourism Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.annals.2019.102813](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102813)

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