NBC Philadelphia

Some Americans Slash Costs With Overseas Surgery

Costa Rica, Thailand, India Among Places Providing Surgery For Less

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More and more Americans are finding that when they need an operation, the insurance company won't pay. Now, thousands of patients are slashing the price of going under the knife by traveling overseas.

D'Arcy Von Schultz's smile used to be a mess. She only had five teeth on her lower jaw left.

Jim Peterson's hip was sore and then he started limping.

Von Schultz and Peterson were among the many people who have turned surgery into adventure.

They flew thousands of miles to exotic countries and had the operations they needed at a fraction of the cost.

Von Schultz spent most of her time in Costa Rica in a dentist's chair getting three bone grafts and six tooth implants.

"It would have cost me right around $30,000 to do this work here. In Costa Rica, it cost me about $8,000.

Peterson went to India

"It was like a five-star hotel. I saw the Taj Mahal. I'm sure you've heard of that," Peterson said.

New Delhi's Max Hospital is sophisticated enough to have a promotional video.

Peterson had his hip joint reshaped and resurfaced. The cost in the United States would have been $60,000.

"We spent just over $10,000 and that was for my -- basically for a month I was there," Peterson said.

South Africa, Argentina, Costa Rica, Thailand and India are some of the places attracting Americans who need surgery. There are now companies that plan this kind of travel.

"Even though you're going to the developing world, there's nothing developing about the hospitals," said Rudy Rupak of Planet Hospital.

Rupak's company has set up hundreds of these trips.

"It's like seven or 10 nurses per patient. A lot of the doctors are board certified," Rupak said.

If you need a spinal fusion, it is about $90,000 in the United States. In Singapore, it is $9,000.

A heart bypass in the United States costs around $175,000. In Thailand, it costs $12,000.

A weight-reducing gastric bypass operation would set you back $48,000 in the United States, but just $11,000 in India.

All three overseas prices include airfare and hotel.

The prices are so alluring that some U.S. medical groups say you should keep these questions in mind:

· How big is the language barrier?

· Once home, do you have a doctor to follow up?

· Is there a plan if something goes wrong?

Something did go wrong for Sonya Nichols and she said she pays a price every time she looks in the mirror.

"I'm scarred for life. I signed up for a face life, a chin implant, arm lift, leg lift and a tummy tuck," Nichols said.

In Argentina, it all cost $20,000. But Nichols might spend much more than that trying to repair the damage.

"What they did was simply left too much tissue at the edges," said U.S. plastic surgeon Dr. Peter Geldner.

Geldner is fixing a tummy tuck that left Nichols with flaps of bumpy skin. Even after Geldner fixes the damage, he said Nichols would still have serious scars on her arms and upper thighs.

"What she looks like is not what most people look like," Geldner said.

So the bottom line is: Buyer beware. You should know what you're getting into and what you will do if something goes wrong.

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