



Health

Patient Travelers

Stephanie Cooperman 10.29.07

Tummy tuck in Mexico? Hip surgery in Bangkok? Despite some risks, medical tourism is becoming a global boom.

Last September, John Mattos was unloading the trunk of his car when a jolt of pain down his lower back sent him tumbling to his knees. For months he shuttled between five doctors in Charlotte, North Carolina, but nerve-root injections, a cocktail of pain relievers, even participation in a clinical trial for a new procedure didn't change his condition. "I was in agony. I only felt comfortable lying on the ground. I couldn't sit. I couldn't drive. I couldn't work," he said.

Doctors finally decided he needed surgery for a herniated disc, but Mattos, a 52-year-old production manager, wasn't ready for the second shock-this time to his checkbook. "I was quoted prices from \$35,000 to \$60,000 for the operation. I didn't believe it. I had already spent \$8,000 and still couldn't walk without a cane." So he bought a plane ticket to India.

In April, Mattos underwent spinal surgery at Wockhardt Hospital in Bangalore. He was supervised by a team of six physicians, who gave him their cell phone numbers in case he had any questions. He recuperated in a suite with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked a garden. A team of chefs made sure he was happy with his meals. A housekeeper did his laundry. Two hours after he woke up postsurgery he was being led through physical therapy exercises. Four days later he walked around a local market and bought his wife a sari. After two weeks and 18,000 miles in air travel, Mattos returned home and went back to work. His total bill, including airfare, came to less than \$7,000. In July, he took a 2,000-mile motorcycle trip with his sons-cane-free. "

My quality of life has improved drastically," Mattos said. "Even if I had the cash, I would go back to Wockhardt for surgery. They did in hours what it took my doctors in the U.S. weeks to accomplish."

Josef Woodman, author of *Patients Beyond Borders: Everybody's Guide to Affordable, World-Class Medical Tourism*, estimates that more than 150,000 Americans went abroad for medical care in 2006. Many are uninsured, self-employed or looking to defer the average \$10,000 to \$12,000 in insurance premiums a family of four now pays a year. Some need joint replacements or stem cell therapies not yet approved by the FDA. Others want to return from an overseas vacation with larger breasts and flatter stomachs. All are searching for quality health care at discount prices, sometimes finding savings of up to 90 percent. Foreign hospitals are more than willing to cut through the red tape and offer Americans fast, efficient services in state-of-the-art facilities complete with luxury suites, on-call concierges and personal chauffeurs. Time to sightsee? Just icing on the cake.

Medical tourism, or traveling for medical care, is not a new phenomenon. The ancient Greeks came from across the Mediterranean to Epidauria, sanctuary of the healing god Asklepios. Roman Britons went to Bath to heal. Today, Americans with a valid passport have their choice. India, Thailand, Singapore and Hong Kong are popular medical travel destinations. Costa Rica, Argentina, South Africa and Brazil, specializing in elective and plastic surgery, are leading the pack in cosmetic tourism. Shuttles even run between border states and Mexico for Americans looking for root canals and dental crowns at dirt-cheap prices. For those who need help negotiating the world of discount medical care, an entire industry of middlemen has sprung up. Rudy Rupak, president of Planet Hospital, an agency that connects patients with 38 hospitals in 13 countries, says his website gets more than 45,000 unique visitors a month.

Though the options are seemingly endless, buyers ought to beware. Ingrid Lomas, the CEO of Surgical Attractions, a South Africa-based cosmetic tourism company, warns patients to look beyond the price tag. "If I were entrusting my body to someone for surgery, I wouldn't go automatically with the cheapest option. I might do that if I was getting a room refurbished, but it's not a good option for your body."

Medical tourists should also consider why services are inexpensive: Is it a more favorable exchange rate or a lack of malpractice insurance that accounts for the discount? Hospital oversight rules vary in each country and postprocedure care is limited to phone calls and e-mails once you return home. Frustrated patients have little recourse to sue foreign doctors from the U.S.

Joint Commission International, a nonprofit organization, does offer a recognizable stamp of approval. It has accredited 140 hospitals overseas and will double that number in the next two years to keep up with the demand for medical tourism—still far less than one percent of the world's hospitals. "Accreditation is not a guarantee but a risk-reduction activity," said Karen Timmons, JCI President and CEO, adding that people need to do their homework before they get on a plane. "Patients should be most concerned with the continuity of care and ask questions. Do staffers speak their language? Do they have patient advocates? Interpreters? What do you do in case of emergency?"

Wockhardt is not only JCI-accredited but is also affiliated with Harvard Medical International—a nonprofit subsidiary of Harvard Medical School—which helped ease the mind of William Allen, 61, who traveled to the hospital's Mumbai branch last December. Ultimately it was the experience of his doctor that sold him. Allen, a veterinary dentist in Lake Worth, Florida, needed a hip replacement but had heard horror stories from colleagues who weren't able to work on large animals again after the complex surgery. He opted for hip resurfacing, which replaces parts of the hip joint while conserving more bone than traditional hip replacement. Since hip resurfacing is a newly FDA-approved procedure, he couldn't find an American doctor who had performed the surgery. The doctor he found at Wockhardt had done more than a thousand. "I wanted someone—foreign or not—with a lot of history to work on my sacred joint," he said. "If you're going to take a gamble, that's the one to take." The total cost of his surgery, hospital stay and flight came to under \$10,000—more than \$30,000 less than a hip replacement in the States.

Sidebar: **Outsourced Operations**

A doctor's experience can be the backbone of an entire medical tourism operation. Air Lift, Inc., has sent 600 people to Guadalajara, Mexico, in the last six years for the exclusive services of Dr. Jose Guerrosantos, a plastic surgeon with U.S. training. "I gave a face-lift to the U.S. Consul of Guadalajara's wife 40 years ago," Dr. Guerrosantos said. "Now the Americans keep coming."

That face-lift today costs \$3,000 compared to \$15,000 in the U.S. Joni Ostenson, a 52-year-old pharmaceutical researcher from Littleton, Colorado, had a lower face-lift two years ago. She put so much trust in "Dr. G." that when she also woke up with swollen lips, she attributed them to his artistry. "If he thought I needed bigger lips then I needed bigger lips," Ostenson said. She's headed back to Mexico for more work in December.

Medical tourists flock to countries where travelers are often cautioned against drinking the water. There, the view from the back of a limo on the way to the hospital can provide quite a culture shock. Bangalore's infamous traffic-cars, motorcycles, auto rickshaws, even cows and monkeys all racing like an out-of-control amusement park ride-was John Mattos' first vision of India. After a few days of sightseeing, he had some advice for future Wockhardt patients: "Bring your own wet wipes," he said. "Lots of them."

Hospitals work hard to insulate foreign patients from the less-than-savory aspects of their surroundings, especially since high plane-ticket costs mean most patients travel alone. Bangkok's thick-as-pea-soup pollution and oppressive heat can be easily forgotten after stepping into Bumrungrad International, the goliath of medical tourism, which looks more like a five- star hotel than a hospital that logs in over 400,000 foreign patient visits annually. The property has lush, tropical landscaping, marble floors, a Starbucks and Au Bon Pain, and Japanese and Italian restaurants to help patients feel at home. Most medical tourism destinations offer patients a choice of hotels to stay in after their surgery, personal drivers and assistants who do everything from contacting family members back home to arranging shopping excursions.

While many foreign hospitals that attract Americans also have travel agents on the premises, cosmetic tourism companies are more likely to use their locations as selling points. Beverly McCarter, who has run Air Lift, Inc., since 2001, advises her clients to stroll around Lake Chapala, now one of the biggest American retirement communities in Mexico, or head to a Guadalajara flower market. Plenitas, based in Buenos Aires, is known for bundling face-lifts with tango lessons, but its location offers something for everyone. "Patients here get beaches, snowcapped mountains, great waterfalls and then Buenos Aires, where they can have a good time at night-see a show, go dancing," said Juan Ruano, a marketing manager. He warns, of course, that those who get any work done below the waist should skip the tango lessons altogether and face-lift patients should always wear the recommended hat and scarves outside.

Sometimes the destination itself inspires people to get a little nip and tuck. Caryn Joyce, a 49-year-old administrator from Atlanta, was planning to use a free ticket to South Africa when she learned about Surgical Attractions. "Pregnancy is a plastic surgeon's best friend. My son weighed in at ten pounds, 13 ounces," she said. "I missed my prepregnancy body." Joyce went on her perfect vacation in February: the breast reduction and tummy tuck she'd always wanted, along with walks on the waterfront, craft shopping and fine dining-with postcard-worthy Cape Town scenery as the backdrop. "Even my operating room had a stunning view of Devil's Peak," she said.

As medical costs continue to soar along with the numbers of uninsured, underinsured and those with skyrocketing deductibles, so too will the demand for medical tourism. Foreign hospitals, more than happy to welcome American patients and their dollars, will continue to roll out the red carpet, offering quick testing, a broad range of procedures and extraordinary savings. Even so, doctors in the U.S. shouldn't worry about empty waiting rooms anytime soon. Insurance companies offer few incentives for Americans to gather their medical records and cross time zones for treatment. Most won't reimburse patients for overseas procedures, and there aren't many promising signs that they will on a grand scale anytime soon. "The U.S. spends \$2 trillion on health care, and insurance companies keep five percent of that. You do the math," said Uwe Reinhardt, a health-care economist at Princeton University. Medical tourism seems to be a growing niche-but still a niche...for the time being.

Planet Hospital's Rudy Rupak says the future of health care in this country may be a new rubric altogether. "I quickly realized if I waited for the insurance companies to work with me, I'd be waiting forever," he said. Just last month, he introduced his own Diaspora Insurance, a combination of medical tourism and insurance. Participants receive rudimentary treatment in the U.S. but must go overseas for nonemergency care. So far he's paired with hospitals in El Salvador. Another bonus? "You can visit coffee plantations, take a tour of volcanos or the Mayan ruins."

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