



Having a cosmetic procedure abroad may save you quite a nice chunk of change. And when you couple this with a tropical vacation post-op, it's no wonder that cosmetic surgery tourism is an attractive option. But wait... before you hop on to the next flight, there are some serious factors to consider, as this type of venture carries a great amount of risk.

DR VERNON CHING elaborates.

COSMETIC MEDICAL TOURISM

SURGERY WITHOUT BORDERS



Cosmetic medical tourism (CMT) is the burgeoning trend of international travel to receive cosmetic medical care. The question is: why would anyone want to travel to a different country with different laws, customs and even a different language for an aesthetic operation? The answer is surprisingly simple: because it's cheaper and more easily available.

That said, however, this choice comes with specific benefits and disadvantages.

Rise of the online medical agency

The internet and globalisation, with online travel agencies (OTAs) such as Expedia, Tripadvisor and Booking.com have paved the way for online medical agencies (OMAs). These third parties facilitate unassisted bookings, enhance the international patient experience with concierge services, and follow a commission-based revenue model.

Furthermore, the offers generally include private hospital services and tout 'highly trained' and



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'credentialed' medical staff. As insurance does not cover elective cosmetic surgery procedures, price is the major selling point of cosmetic surgery tourism.

Internet-savvy patients, often influenced by social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, have flocked to these sites to facilitate cosmetic surgery at a cheaper rate. Many millennials (one out of four) are prepared to chance cosmetic surgery abroad despite the risks.

Top destinations for nip/tucks and procedures

Popular countries for cosmetic surgery tourism include Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, the Philippines, Poland, Thailand and Turkey. These destinations offer everything from 'spa and surgery' to 'tropical, scenic tour' vacation packages.

As for procedures, the majority of patients taking cosmetic surgery vacations have invasive operations. Popular procedures requested include breast augmentation, liposuction, facelift, tummy tuck, eyelid surgery, and rhinoplasty. And with the introduction of plastic surgery reality shows, some companies are now even offering 'extreme makeovers'.

Take heed: before you plunge in, know what's in store

There is no doubt that cosmetic medical tourism is a price-driven phenomenon that is commonly sought after by a subset of patients who may not be sufficiently educated on outcomes and complication rates.

Recent data from the UK and Australia shows that in the event of a complication, patients with insufficient funds may be left with nowhere to turn, as health insurers and medical aids do not cover these events overseas or at home.

It also has to be noted that cosmetic surgery is indeed real surgery, and even at the highest level of care, every operation – including cosmetic surgery – has risk. Furthermore, this risk may increase when procedures are performed during cosmetic surgery vacations. For instance, infections are the most common complications that arise in patients that go abroad for cosmetic surgery, which include unsightly scars, haematomas, and unsatisfactory results.

The importance of surgical skill and patient safety

Although many experts and qualified plastic surgeons are practising all over the world, it may be difficult to assess the training and credentials of these surgeons. Patients may be taking unnecessary risks when choosing cosmetic surgery vacations, as they unknowingly select unqualified physicians who perform procedures in non-accredited surgical facilities.

In other words, in order to perform cosmetic surgery safely and successfully, one needs properly trained surgeons, qualified anaesthetic staff, sterile technique and modern equipment. Vacation destinations may not have proper medical accreditation boards to certify doctors or medical facilities. Many hospitals are privately owned and operated, making it challenging to check surgeon and anaesthetist credentials. Additionally, there could be no legal recourse if surgical negligence by the physician or hospital occurs.

Another factor to take into consideration is that many cosmetic surgery procedures, products or devices used in other countries may not have passed stringent requirements for use. One example is breast implants used in the USA, which must meet strict standards of safety before being registered for use.

Not-so-vay-cay

Interestingly, cosmetic surgery trips are marketed as a holiday, yet patients should actually avoid all vacation activities after surgery. I have yet to meet a colleague who would advise their patient to go on holiday immediately after having any invasive cosmetic procedure. To reduce the possibility of complications and properly heal, patients should not sunbathe, drink alcohol, swim,

waterski, parasail, take long trips (by foot or bus), or exercise after surgery – all the same post-op instructions as if they were at home.

Moreover, long flights after surgery can increase the risk of developing blood clots of the lower legs and pulmonary embolism. It's for this reason that most doctors advise patients to wait at least 7 to 10 days after body and face procedures before travelling.

What about post-op care?

Follow-up care is an essential part of any surgery. Unfortunately, cosmetic surgery vacation packages either provide insufficient post-op care, or none at all, once the patient returns home. What's more, patients who experience a complication at home may find it hard to locate a plastic surgeon to treat the problem, or to provide revision surgeries. This is due to local surgeons not knowing what procedure the original doctor

used, thus making treatment difficult or nearly impossible.

Meanwhile, revision surgeries can be more complicated and expensive than the initial operation, with patients rarely getting the desired outcome. They may also develop complications following their procedure, which will ultimately incur extra costs that are often in multiples of their original spend (and that is if they're lucky enough to find a surgeon to correct their complications).

Final thought

Bargain surgery can be expensive. So, before going

online to book your breast augmentation in a foreign country at a bargain-basement price, do your homework, be informed and have realistic expectations.

There's no doubt that cross-border plastic surgery is on the rise, but only you can determine whether it's really worth the price. **A2**

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