

# Travel Smart for Treatment

As the world becomes more globalised, more people are seeking medical care abroad. From combining a business trip with an executive health check to hopping on a plane for major surgery, the possibilities are myriad and don't have to break the bank. Reader's Digest Asia presents a guide to medical tourism in Asia

By LIBBY PEACOCK



Medical Tourism. Photo: iStockphoto; Bumrungrad Hospital

AN EXPATRIATE working in Jakarta a few years ago was diagnosed with a breast lump by a doctor at the medical service International SOS. Barbara Jennings (name has been changed for privacy) said the doctor recommended a biopsy but suggested she get it done elsewhere as the laboratory results in Indonesia were notoriously unreliable.

"She said I should travel to Singapore. I had the most supportive and professional care there. Fortunately the lump was benign, but I think how lucky I was to work for a company whose medical aid programme paid for my flights and all the medical treatment," she recalls.

A 2008 report by consulting firm McKinsey & Company placed the medical inpatient-travel market (excluding

"wellness tourists" seeking complementary therapies and travellers opting for uncomplicated out-patient treatments) at a conservative 60,000 to 85,000 per year.

But statistics vary. Josef Woodman, author of the comprehensive *Patients Beyond Borders* guide put the number of health travellers worldwide in 2008 at nearly 3 million annually, with 180,000 from the US alone.

The McKinsey survey indicated that 40 percent of medical travellers seek advanced technology as a primary consideration, while 32 percent seek better healthcare, 15 percent faster medical services and just nine percent lower costs.

## Why Opt for Medical Tourism?

Patients from different markets seek healthcare abroad for different reasons, according to Kenneth Mays, senior director, hospital marketing & business development of world-renowned facility Bumrungrad International hospital in Bangkok. "People fly to hospitals like Bumrungrad mainly to seek better care than they can get at home: better-trained doctors, specialists in certain diseases or treatments, advanced medical technology and internationally accredited patient safety." And this is also often at a lower cost as compared to their home countries, to boot.

Singapore prices have always been higher than those in surrounding countries, but medical travellers choose the destination because of the "higher assurance of quality" and because "final costs" – not just for medical bills but also for overall period of illness – tend to be lower, says Dr Jason CH Yap, advisor for business development for Connexion, an innovative new integrated hospitality-healthcare complex comprising a private acute tertiary hospital, medical centre, retail mall and luxury hotel due to launch in 2013.

## What Sort of Medical Services are Health Tourists After?

Common services that attract medical travellers to Thailand, Singapore and, increasingly, but in much smaller volumes, to Malaysia and the Philippines, include procedures such as face lifts, tummy tucks and breast augmentation, dental work, ophthalmology, heart surgery, orthopaedics, neurosurgery, fertility treatments, LASIK eye repair, obesity surgery and cancer treatments.

The Philippines boasts competent English-speaking and overseas-trained medical staff. Specialties include dental work, cardiac surgery and procedures such as eye surgery, fertility treatment, hair transplants and weight loss operations. Malaysia does not have the medical-tourism volume or reputation of Thailand, but Kuala Lumpur and Penang in particular attract medical travellers for dental work, laser eye surgery, cosmetic and heart surgery, among other procedures.



Medical procedures abroad may provide quality treatment at a more affordable cost

## Asking the Right Questions

Countries may be associated with certain specialities, but it is important to find out what your chosen institution and doctors are qualified to do, advises Kenneth Mays of Bumrungrad International hospital, saying the hospital should provide an estimate of recovery time and postoperative care. "Most patients don't go to the beach to recover – they want to return home as soon as it's medically safe."

People should also consider capacity and waiting time. "Medical travellers want to get evaluated, be referred to appropriate specialists and have the tests and treatment they need in a compact time period. Some hospitals that promote themselves as medical destinations don't have the capacity for many international patients, so you may end up waiting days or weeks."

Tables of comparative costs by country should be read with caution as such estimates are

usually not audited and some countries supply averages that include low-cost government hospitals where medical travellers would never go, while others offer costs excluding items such as doctors' fees. "In industry circles, it's generally accepted that the top three country destinations are Thailand, India and Singapore, and that India is a bit cheaper than Thailand, and Singapore more expensive."

Patients should choose facilities accredited by respected international bodies such as the Joint Commission International (JCI) or International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and reputable surgeons that are properly trained and have professional memberships. Medical travellers must enquire beforehand about post-operative care and recovery time. There is also a compulsory cooling-off period of about six months after booking the surgery, which is done as multi-stage operations (as opposed to one procedure, as at some hospitals).

Other considerations include length of hospital stay and recovery time. Singapore prices may be higher per hospital-day stay, but patients tend to stay shorter. Procedures may be pricier, but outcomes may be better and so patients recover and return to work faster.

Medical travellers must do their sums beforehand, incorporating hotel, travel and other fees. But major surgery, as well as small procedures, in Asian destinations usually come to much less than in Western countries. Weigh all the pros and cons before crossing the border for your health care.



To read the full-length story, pick up the March 2011 issue of Reader's Digest Asia.



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