

Facing the facts

Travel for treatment

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Cosmetic surgery was one of the earliest forms of treatment abroad to become popular, and the reasons why 14,500 people headed off last year are still much the same. There's the chance to go to a holiday destination, so you can come back looking good and put it down to sun and relaxation. And of course there are the savings to be made (see box).

But increasingly it is not just about money, according to a recent report by the American futurist consulting firm Social Technologies, entitled Medical Tourism: Cross-Border Care Grows. "One of the biggest drivers is that people can access alternative medicine and experimental care they wouldn't be able to find in the US," writes the author, Chris Carbone. "Some consumers turn to medical tourism because they want to find complementary and alternative healthcare services."

One of his examples is the Vitallife Wellness Center in Bangkok, which works closely with the super luxury Bumrungrad Hospital (see more details in the introduction to this report) and provides offerings such as "custom compound nutraceuticals" and "anti-ageing" skin care treatments. In India, too, modern medical tourism sometimes mixes with traditional ayurvedic medicine and yoga.

Some experts are concerned that people are getting too much cosmetic surgery at one time: going abroad to get a complete body lift, for instance, which would never be done in America or the UK. Other concerns centre around the amount of pre- and post-operative care on offer. "Some just offer a chat with a salesman," says Hamish Laing, of the British Association of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons.

A report published in a medical journal in September warned that 60 patients who had travelled abroad for surgery had been treated for "acute complications" in the London area over a six months period.

Such concerns are directly addressed by an agency called Mills & Mills Medical. Founded by a couple with extensive experience in the cosmetic industry, it arranges trips to the MHC International Hospital in Puerto Banus, Marbella which specialises in cosmetic and dental surgery. Their surgeons are all fully qualified in Spain and have experience working in Italy and the UK.

"The surgeons come to see patients in the UK and work out a plan," says spokeswoman Eileen Knight. "We're proud of our personal service and emphasise the importance of proper recuperation. Once back in the UK, our patient care guarantee policy means that all costs will be paid if there are any problems for two years afterwards. We aim to provide a circle of care with no gaps."

One of the trends that Knight has noticed recently is a big increase in the number of men also having work done when they come with their partners. "The number of male clients is increasing massively," says Knight. "Thirty per cent are now men. They generally have facial surgery, such as botox on their foreheads, or facelifts, or they get their eye-bags done."

One who went for something rather more drastic was Alan Duncan, a 37-year-old salesman. Ever since he'd been a teenager he had been self-conscious about having a flabby, overhanging stomach. He'd tried everything to get rid of it - Slendertone, every fad diet going, gym workouts -- but it stayed stubbornly in place. So last December he signed up with Mills & Mills Medical and spent £3,500 on liposuction. He described the operation, which took around 45 minutes and sucked out two litres of fat, as "not painful, surprisingly. I had to wear a support garment for six weeks, but when I took the bandages off I had a smile on my face. The overhang had gone."

Another well-established agency called Beautiful Beings (phone in UK 08708 965 856), based in Suffolk, sends patients to a clinic in Prague. Their website has a lot of detail of what is involved in the various procedures and assessment is done by filling in a questionnaire and sending off pictures for a surgeon to look at. The quote then includes flights, accommodation and treatment. Treatment prices are around half those in the UK and accommodation is around £40 a night.

An agency called Picture Perfect organises trips to a clinic in Cyprus, which offers a wide range of cosmetic and dental procedures as well as being an ideal holiday destination for relaxing and recuperating. The surgeons at the clinic are all member of various international societies including the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons and the European Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. Several travel agents, depending on where you are, can make the travel and accommodation arrangements in the UK. You need to involve your GP because the surgeon will contact him/her and it is the GP who handles any post-operative care. In the last year the number of patients coming from the UK has doubled.

If you are prepared to go further abroad there are bargains to be had in Thailand, where 600,000 people from the UK and USA travelled for cosmetic surgery last year. An American based company - **Cosmetic Surgery Travel** - specialises in supporting medical tourists in Thailand.

Comparing costs

Most countries charge about half or less of UK prices. For instance, according to the detailed price comparisons available on the website treatmentabroad.com, the cost of the top reason for travelling, breast augmentation, is £4,350 in the UK, while in Poland it is £1,920, in Hungary £1,930 and in India £2,087. The next two most popular operations are the face-lift and the tummy tuck. A tummy tuck costs £4,810 in Britain compared with £2,165 in Belgium and £2,196 in the Czech Republic. A UK facelift would be £6,750, against £2,070 in Belgium or £2,219 in the Czech Republic.