

# SUN, SAND...and SURGERY?

Also known as medical tourism, more and more people are opting to cross international borders to go under the knife. The numbers are proof of this: seven per cent of all medical tourists are Canadians, spending \$5 billion overseas annually on medical procedures, according to data from a 2008 McKinsey & Co. report. While not all of those dollars were spent on cosmetic procedures, with an increasingly globalized medical industry, the evidence points to an unrelenting trend in going abroad for enhancements. But is it safe? Here's what you need to know. **BY MARLENE REGO**

**F**lip through any Frommer's or Lonely Planet travel guide and you may be surprised to come across listings for expeditions with names like "Thailand Makeover Escape" or "Surgeon and Safari." These are actual travel packages endorsed by medical tourism associations (including accommodations and air) that sell the idea of jetting overseas to discreetly have cosmetic surgery in exotic locales, then recover while observing gazelles in the sub-Saharan desert.

The appeal is easy to see. For every \$15,000 facelift in Canada, there's a surgeon advertising one at half-price in Thailand. Even with airfare, that's a bargain. (Never mind that the words "bargain" and "surgery" should never cross paths.) "It's a price-driven culture and the reason for patients going outside of the country would primarily be cost," says Dr. Robert Sleightholm, MD, FRCPC, a plastic surgeon in Toronto.

Dr. Sleightholm stresses that "foreign" does not necessarily imply incompetent. He's met many renowned plastic surgeons at international medical conferences. "Some of the surgeons [for example] in countries like Mexico and South America are excellent," he says. But remember: substandard physicians can be found in any country, so when you elect to become a "medical tourist" you need to take it more seriously than you would a vacation. ►



**REVISION ALERT** “The most common problem is an unsatisfactory result,” says Toronto-based Dr. Richard Rival, MD, FRCPC (Facial Plastic Surgery, Otolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery). “I saw a patient recently who had a facelift in Thailand, and she had problems with asymmetry—one side being different from the other side and being pulled too tight.” In the end, this patient ended up spending more money for a corrective procedure with Dr. Rival, which negated any cost-saving benefits of the initial procedure.

And Dr. Sleightholm cautions that it’s harder to be satisfied with a revision: “The best chance for the best result is the first procedure. Secondary procedures are more complicated; there’s more scarring and other things that are less controllable.”

**VACATION DOWNTIME** While some patients may like the sound of a two-for-one Florida vacation and surgery combo, especially if you only have two weeks off a year, don’t expect to sit by the pool, warns Dr. Rival. “The reality is recovering from surgery is not a vacation. You go through significant pain, bruising and swelling, and you can’t expose your skin to the sun.” In his opinion, “It’s better to have the comforts of home and the backup of medical professionals and family members.”

Another factor to consider is the flight home: flying immediately following surgery can lead to deep vein thrombosis, a nasty complication caused by blood clots that form in the legs due to lack of mobility.

### RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH...

**AND MORE RESEARCH!** Whether at home or abroad, it’s always important to do your homework on the credentials and qualifications of medical professionals—but this can become a bit more complicated when dealing with international clinics. Dr. Sleightholm recommends asking

for credentials from the doctor directly and checking to see if he is she board certified in his or her own country. “The patient should do some legwork and call the university the doctor graduated from and make sure it’s not a school they’ve never heard of or doesn’t exist,” he says. You may also want to get a second opinion from a local doctor you trust, or use a third party, such as a medical tourism association, to find reputable doctors overseas. Finally, check that the doctor is a member of the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. [Membership means that a surgeon has been certified in his or her home country, has been recommended for membership in writing by two current ISAPS members, and has been active in practice for at least three years.]

Another alternative is to find a doctor certified in your home country who also performs procedures overseas. Dr. Edward Armogan, MD, offers fillers, injectables and laser treatments at Aqua Medical Spa in Toronto and London, Ont., and also spends one week a month at his Barbados location, where they use the same North American equipment and price menu to cater to a steady flow of tourists. “The issue is who is doing the procedure, their credibility and his or her track record,” he says.

**THE HARD FACTS** If you opt for invasive surgery overseas and there are complications, it’s also important to consider who will help with post-operative care or follow-up procedures. Some doctors may shy away. “It might limit the local surgeons who would be willing to do the procedures,” says Dr. Sleightholm. “Certainly some surgeons would take up the challenge and try to help the patient. There are others who are kind of unwilling to jump in and do the procedure. Even though they’re attempting to improve the situation, if it didn’t work out in a patient’s favour, they could be drawn in legally, as well.”

In the event of running into complications abroad, provincial healthcare (such as OHIP) may offer coverage for smaller procedures in what’s called the “C schedule.” Examples include scar revision for problems like wound dehiscence (where the wound splits along the surgical suture). Don’t expect provincial health care to cover major cosmetic corrections, though. The patient will be left with the bill (and needing more time off) for a revision procedure.

**THE BRIGHT SIDE** The most notable issue in the nip-tuck overseas debate is finding a doctor you trust and asking the right questions. “If the procedure is done well, safely and with adequate followup then it’s probably OK to go abroad and have it done,” says Dr. Sleightholm. But if the impetus for booking surgery in another country is purely saving a buck, then expect to be underwhelmed by the quality of care.

In the end, there are advantages. “With fillers you can have some swelling, bruising and redness, so if you’re spending a week or two in Barbados when you go back you won’t show signs,” says Dr. Armogan. So, while in some cases you may have to dig into your doctor’s background and ask the tough questions yourself, finding qualified surgeons abroad certainly isn’t impossible when there are so many world-class experts. ☺

## THE WELLNESS OPTION

Anne Dimon started the website [traveltowellness.com](http://traveltowellness.com) eight years ago, an online magazine dedicated to spa and wellness destinations. She describes the concept as “getting away to maintain, promote or kick-start a healthy lifestyle.” This includes travelling for spa treatments, or outdoor fitness, like hiking or cycling and may be an alternative to medical tourism for those who aren’t ready to wade into such complicated waters quite yet. In recent

years, Dimon has seen medical tourism give way to wellness travel. It’s still a way to indulge yourself and take care of your body, without the commitment of surgery, she explains. “Thailand and the Philippines, which have been heavily promoting the medical end of tourism, are beginning to rethink their tourism strategies to include spa treatments that people are becoming more comfortable with – Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, water therapies and certain energy treatments.”