

Worst Medical Tourism Disasters

Traveling overseas for medical procedures is a growing industry—but is the cost savings worth the risk?

From [November 2009](#) By [Adam H. Graham](#)

Does the idea of saving thousands of dollars on an operation and spending seven days of healing time in a serene eco-resort surrounded by pristine rainforest sound appealing?

What about flying 10 hours home with a weeping wound and being rushed to the emergency room for revision surgery the minute you land?

These are the potential upsides—and downsides—of modern medical tourism, a \$20 billion industry that's become especially popular with Americans, and even Canadians, Brits, Western Europeans, and Australians, patients often faced with pricey hospital treatments in their home countries.



To take advantage of this demand, foreign clinics are increasingly vying for recognition from the Joint Commission International, the leading U.S.-based hospital accreditation body. Applicants must meet a stringent set of criteria, including having a competently trained medical staff who understand foreign languages and cultures, an honest admission and price policy, and performance requirements in 20 other specific areas. “The risks for patients in traveling far distances for care can be significant,” says JCI’s president and CEO, Karen H. Timmons. “Patients need assurance that their physician and health-care provider have the right qualifications and credentials. Patients must also understand the legal redress available to them.”

Advocates of medical tourism have criticized Western naysayers for being xenophobic. They also claim that while botch jobs top the headlines, there are as many competent doctors and medical professionals in, say, [Brazil](#) or [Singapore](#)—two countries that have leaped ahead in the race for med-tourism dollars—as there are in the U.S. Meanwhile some insurance companies, such as Blue Cross Blue Shield of [South Carolina](#), are facilitating arrangements for patients who choose lower-cost offshore hospitals. And a growing number of private businesses have encouraged their insured employees to travel abroad for more affordable health care.

The objectives of medical tourism are also changing, as the procedures have moved far beyond the “getting some work done” type. Various countries themselves are emerging as medical specialists—Costa Rica for dentistry, Malaysia for cardiac bypass surgery, and Taiwan for bone marrow transplants. Other countries, including Singapore, are developing high-tech generalized hospitals, often staffed with American-schooled doctors, to service patients seeking deeply discounted treatments.

“People think medical tourism is cheap surgery and therefore lower quality,” says Renée-Marie Stephano, president of the international nonprofit Medical Tourism Association. “But our role is to provide transparency about the quality and pricing of health care and to let people know that overseas, they can get as good if not better health care than at home, and afford it.”

Hotels and resorts want in on the action and have created attractive medical vacation packages, which offer clinic shuttle service, holistic personal cooks, and luxurious accommodations designed for recovery.

But there are virtually no resources or organizations monitoring which hospitals or countries have the most malpractice cases or highest patient satisfaction rates. And high-profile botch jobs continue to make the news from time to time. It was widely reported that Usher's soon-to-be-ex wife, Tameka Foster, had severe surgery complications in [Brazil](#). Irish newspapers reported that Irishman Pierre Christian Lawlor traveled to Bogota for lipo and didn't live to return. And according to the *New York Daily News*, Big Apple native Stacey Cavaliere flew to [Costa Rica](#) for some nip and tuck work but upon her return was rushed to the emergency room; it took eight additional surgeries to correct her condition.

Dr. Sam Rizk, a [New York](#)-based, board-certified facial plastic surgeon, director of Manhattan Facial Plastic Surgery, and one of a handful of revision surgeons in the U.S. who correct botched operations, sees the dark side of medical tourism. "A lot of patients who go to South America to get cheap surgery end up coming back with problems," he says. "I've seen everything, from a patient who caught hepatitis in the [Dominican Republic](#) to one who had a piece of silicone implant sticking through his nose."

The big question remains: Is it safe or do you get what you pay for? "We are trying to collect more valid primary data and are monitoring all the trends and issues in medical tourism," says Dr. David G. Vequist IV, founder and director of the Center for Medical Tourism Research. "I personally see medical tourism as a similar trend to outsourcing—or more specifically, offshoring."

Dr. Andrew Smith, a [New York](#)-based neurologist, has a more poetic outlook: "Healing happens as a result of a relationship which is then informed by technical skill, never by commodity trading."

In short, caveat emptor.