

## Fears and frustrations driving patients abroad

By Patrick Sawyer and Laura Donnelly

Last Updated: 1:06am GMT 29/10/2007

The threat of contracting a fatal superbug, and despair over hospital waiting times are fuelling a boom in health tourism, with Britons turning to overseas hospitals in growing numbers.

A survey – as new figures are about to be published on MRSA and Clostridium difficile – reveals that a third do so because of rising hospital infections.

Figures this week are expected to show a continued rise in outbreaks of the superbugs. And experts warn that the latest statistics would represent "the tip of the iceberg" with hundreds of thousands of cases going undetected.

The figures from the Health Protection Agency are expected to show that cases of C. diff, which have risen five-fold in the past decade, have increased beyond the 55,000 cases reported last year.

The number of MRSA infections is predicted to fall slightly, but experts warn that the statistics would only include cases where MRSA was detected in a patient's blood, not in the area surrounding wounds, where it is commonly found.

Dr Mark Enright, a microbiologist, said: "Most experts think bloodstream MRSA represents about 15 per cent of the actual cases of the infection found in the hospital, so these figures will represent the tip of the iceberg."

He also warned that many hospitals failed to spot the symptoms of C. diff, meaning that many patients who suffered might never be included in NHS statistics.

**One "health tour operator", Taj Medical Group, which specialises in India, points to superbug infections as a key reason why Britons are seeking treatment abroad.**

**Last year, it arranged treatment and travel for 400 Britons. Dr Jagdish Jethwa, its director, said: "They go because they are fed up with long NHS queues, or they have had appointments cancelled three or four times. Some go because they are scared of rising MRSA rates and know a friend or relative who has been infected in a British hospital."**

A number of hospitals in India screen patients for MRSA, which they would treat before any surgery. Earlier this month, Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister, said that Britain will adopt a similar policy within the year. Screening of emergency admissions could be in place within three years.

Cost was another reason given for seeking surgery overseas, according to the survey, carried out

by the information service Treatment Abroad. Those unable to bypass queues through private health care found cheaper alternatives in other countries.

Indian hospitals charge 20-50 per cent less than private British clinics. In Madras, a single knee replacement can cost £4,200, compared with £9,500 in Britain.

Heart bypass operations typically cost £5,300 in India, including the cost of transport and accommodation, compared with £14,000 in Britain.

Almost all those surveyed said they had no regrets and would travel abroad again if necessary; 39 per cent wanted to combine treatment with a holiday.

But India is not the only destination that is proving a popular destination with British health tourists. Nearly a third opt for hospitals, often elsewhere in Europe, to avoid long NHS waiting times.

Phil Smith, a logistical expert at Northampton-based People Logistics, said: "People want to go to France because they are often in too much pain to wait six months it takes to see a consultant and have surgery in Britain. With us, they have to wait only two to three weeks for the operation to be carried out."

French surgeons specialise in minimally invasive knee surgery not routinely available in NHS hospitals.

About 2,500 Britons have travelled to France for knee and hip surgery with People Logistics alone. The company, founded in 2000, has seen the number of patients it handles grow from about 25 a month to 40 a month since the start of this year.

"Patients are also coming to us because of growing fears over MRSA and C.diff," said Mr Smith. "We've never had a case of MRSA from the clinic we deal with in Abbeville and it has a less than one per cent infection rate.

"Cost is another factor. To go privately in the UK costs as much as £12,500. It's £7,000 in France."

People Logistics is among several companies with links to hospitals around the world that have sprung up in the past few years. They act as brokers, arranging "sun and surgery" packages which include the cost of the operation, travel and accommodation.

Many patients bypass the operators to make their own arrangements with hospitals, using the internet to compare success rates and find the specialist they need.

The Treatment Abroad survey of 290 patients, just over half of whom were aged between 40 and 60, also found that marginally more women than men sought treatment abroad, possibly because many foreign clinics offer cosmetic surgery at attractive prices.

Spain is becoming popular for fertility treatment. Anonymity for sperm and egg donors is still guaranteed, unlike in Britain, and success rates are high.

The Netherlands is seen as an attractive destination for cancer treatment, with hospitals there much quicker to use cancer drugs. Belgium's record for heart surgery is attracting health tourists, with infection rates of 0.5 per cent, compared with 1.5 in Britain. It was ranked top out of 24 EU states for cardiac treatment by the European Heart Journal.

The numbers of British patients travelling overseas is expected to continue to rise, according to the

Treatment Abroad survey.

In India alone, health tourism is expected to be worth £1.1 billion by the beginning of the next decade. Last year, an estimated 150,000 foreigners visited India for medical procedures, and the number is increasing at the rate of about 15 per cent a year.

But patients are being warned to research countries and hospitals thoroughly before seeking treatment.

The advice of David Hancock, author of *The Complete Medical Tourist*, is: "Ask for testimonials of patients who have undergone procedures at the medical facility. Contact the people personally to make sure there were no later complications."

He also recommends taking a friend or companion along to help cope with difficulties before or after surgery. "The prices are seductive," he said, "but there are pitfalls. People should not regard it as a holiday with an operation thrown in. They should choose the location for medical reasons."

**The reputable agencies also warn British patients to be on their guard against rogue operators.**

**Dipa Jethwa, the Taj Medical Group's customer support manager, said: "Unfortunately, there are a lot of people wanting to make quick money and we see a lot of companies jumping on the health tourism bandwagon. It just takes one bad case to tarnish us all."**

**For more details:**

Website: [www.tajmedical.com](http://www.tajmedical.com)

Email: [info@tajmedical.com](mailto:info@tajmedical.com)

Tel: +1-877-799-9797 (USA/Canada)

Tel: +44-2476-466-118 (Internationally)

Tel: 0800 1076 360 (Free Phone – UK Only)