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No waiting lists. Spotless hospitals. Brilliant after-care. Why more and more Britons are choosing surgery abroad

INCREASING numbers of people are choosing to go abroad for surgery — encouraged by cheap air fares, lower surgery costs, lower incidences of MRSA and daunted by long NHS waiting lists and the spiralling cost of private treatment in the UK. Many countries also have state-of-the-art hospitals and highly-qualified surgeons — so it's no wonder that in the past decade medical tourism has become a multi-billion-pound industry. But how do you know where to go? Here DAVID HANCOCK, author of a new book, The Complete Medical Tourist, examines operations in seven countries around the world.

A patient's guide to...

HEALTH TOURISM

HIP REPLACEMENT: FRANCE

Why: France has one of the world's best health systems — no waiting lists, top-notch hospitals and excellent food. French orthopaedic surgery is way ahead of what's generally available in the UK, using minimally invasive surgery (MIS) which involves making a 3in cut instead of a 9in to 12in incision, no cutting into muscle tissue and a computer guiding the new joint into position, which means it is much more accurate. Very low rates of MRSA.
Why not: The language. Not all staff speak fluent English.
How: People Logistics Ltd arrange weekly door-to-door trips to the Clinique St Isabelle in Abbeville and the Clinique Villette in Dunkerque, where senior consultants are also registered with the GMC. Tel 0800 5876 950 or visit www.people-logistics.com
Cost: £6,350 for the 14-day package, including door-to-door transportation.
Down time: 14-day stay in hospital.
UK cost: approx £11,000-£12,000 for comparable stay in hospital.
NHS waiting time: Up to two years.

CASE STUDY

RACHEL JENKINS, 76, is retired and lives in York. She says:

MY HIP problem began around eight years ago, but by visiting an osteopath regularly I could still go hill walking quite happily. Then last year, my left hip started to deteriorate and suddenly I couldn't walk more than 200 yards without pain. My GP referred me for an X-ray in January this year, which revealed I had no cartilage left in my hip joint. I had severe osteoarthritis and needed an immediate hip replacement. My GP said the waiting list for an operation on the NHS was about one year. But I didn't want to wait that long — I live alone and was becoming more and more immobile. Even driving was becoming difficult.
By pure chance, I spotted an advertisement in Saga magazine for a French clinic offering hip replacements. The French healthcare system is considered one of the finest in the world, so I contacted People Logistics Ltd, which arranges door-to-door trips to the Clinique St Isabelle in Abbeville, about one hour's drive from Calais.
Two weeks later, in March, I was chauffeur-driven to the Abbeville clinic via the Channel Tunnel. I loved the idea that I had 14 days to recover, compared with the standard five-day hospital stay in Britain. The trip, which included meals and accommodation, cost me £6,350, around half what it would cost at home.
The French clinic was immaculate, with no cases of MRSA, and it had very professional staff.
The operation went smoothly and I've just walked two miles without using a walking stick.
I'm now planning a bird-watching trip to Costa Rica.

■ *Clinique St Isabelle: 00 33 1 40 88 44 00.*

HEART SURGERY: GERMANY

Why: Heart by-pass is now a common operation and you could save up to £5,000 by going to Germany, with its excellent hospitals and low levels of MRSA. Packages on offer include chauffeuring patients from airports to clinics, and translators are on hand. There is a particularly excellent hospital, The Heart Institute at Lahr, which carries out 2,300 bypasses a year, and possesses the best facilities and heart monitoring equipment currently available in Europe
Why not: No good reason not to go — unless you'd be nervous about being abroad or are worried about the inconvenience and costs of correcting any future problems. Some nurses may not speak English. Little or no English TV in hospital rooms.
How: Direct Healthcare International Ltd, 020 7553 3401 or www.direct-healthcare.com
Cost: Heart by-pass £7,600-£7,900; mitral valve repair £9,300 (all include a ten-day stay in hospital). Flights, transfers and extra accommodation not included.
Down time: Allow around three weeks in Germany before making the trip home.
UK cost: Approx £12,000-£15,000.
NHS waiting time: Varies from region to region. Can be up to six months before you see a surgeon and up to another six months for an operation.

KNEALE TALBOT, 68, lives in Cornwall with his partner Dr Sally Peller, 49. He divorced 15 years ago and has four children and six grandchildren. He says:

FRUSTRATED with NHS waiting times, I flew over to Germany a few weeks ago to have heart surgery. I cannot find one single fault with the exemplary care I received at just over half the cost of a private hospital in the UK. Though I have a healthy lifestyle, earlier this year, while on holiday in Trinidad, I had a massive heart attack. The consultant there told me I would definitely have another if it wasn't seen to.
I saw a British cardiac surgeon in March, but I knew there would be at least a three-month wait before I would be operated on under the NHS. Privately, it would have cost £18,500 for two days in intensive care, six days on the ward and no rehabilitation.
So I started searching the internet for European hospitals and found an organisation in Germany called German

CASE STUDY

Medicine. I contacted them and plans for me to have my bypass at the Heart Institute Lahr/Baden, were soon in place. On Wednesday, March 22, I flew to Strasbourg where someone from the hospital met me at the airport. And on the Friday, I had my open-heart surgery — three coronary bypass grafts and an artificial aortic valve fitted.
My surgeon had travelled the world, gaining a wealth of experience in places such as the John Radcliffe in Oxford, so I don't think there could have been anyone better than him.
I then went into intensive care for three days and spent a week in rehabilitation. My treatment in Germany was superb — they genuinely care about their patients. The wards were cleaned every day and MRSA is unheard of. My only complaint is trivial: the Germans make an awful cup of tea!

KNEE SURGERY: POLAND

Why: With prices between a half and a third of similar treatment in the UK, orthopaedic procedures such as knee surgery are becoming increasingly popular for medical tourists from Britain. Polish surgeons use the same Johnson & Johnson Depuy prostheses as are widely used in the UK. In addition, the Jagiellon University Orthopaedic Hospital in Krakow also offers an excellent physiotherapy unit where patients can stay for several weeks, providing much more extensive treatment than the seven to ten days generally given both privately and on the NHS in Britain.
Why not: Although Polish hospitals are proficient, they're not up to the standards of Belgium, France or Germany. Not all staff speak English, so you may need a translator.
How: Barbara Thurgood & Co, Medical Services offers a 28-day package to the Jagiellon University Orthopaedic Hospital, including flights, door-to-door escorted service, English-speaking co-ordinators and all operation, accommodation and physiotherapy costs. Contact 020 8651 5443 or visit www.barbarathurgood.com
Cost: £6,750 (per knee) for a knee replacement operation, £8,750 for a knee revision (repairing or replacing earlier implants).
Down time: One month.
UK cost: Knee replacement £12,000-£17,000; knee revision £15,000-£20,000.
NHS waiting time: Up to 12 months.

CATARACTS: SOUTH AFRICA

Why: World-class surgeons, hospitals and clinical care which compare with those in America and Western Europe — but at only a fraction of the cost for the treatment. The operation is performed under topical anaesthetic using eye drops, and high-frequency ultrasound removes the cloudy part of the lens. An artificial lens is implanted at the same time. An overnight stay in hospital is not necessary and most patients report greatly improved vision the following day.
Why not: Possibly only worthwhile if you combine it with a holiday. Patients tend to visit South Africa because of the standard of care available at a reasonable price — not because surgery is much cheaper.
How: Contact Surgeon & Safari, 00 27 11 463 3154, www.surgeon-and-safari.co.za and Mediscapes Surgery Abroad 00 27 21 422 3932 or www.surgeryabroad.com
Cost: £1,600 per eye. Hotel and flights extra.
Down time: Three or four days. Air travel is not forbidden after surgery.
UK cost: £1,800-£2,900.
NHS waiting time: Up to 12 months.

IVF: MALAYSIA

Why: Malaysia is a popular place for fertility treatment with many clinics offering procedures for around half the price of Western clinics. Of particular renown are the Damansara Fertility Centers based in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru, which attract couples from all round the world with a success rate comparable to leading clinics worldwide (live birth rate of 40 per cent).
One British woman had twins, born 18 months apart (conceived from the same batch of eggs and sperm but one was frozen and implanted a year later) following treatment there. The clinics are major purpose-built centres with their own labs, sperm banks and preimplantation genetic diagnosis equipment (PGD) all on one site. They offer all the usual fertility procedures plus others — such as sex selection, assisted hatching, embryo freeze-thaw and surrogacy.
Why not: A long way to travel, and you'll need to stay for several weeks — or even months — depending on how many cycles you want. The alternative, flying back and forth from the UK, could prove draining and expensive.
How: Contact the Damansara Fertility Centers, direct on 00 603 7729 3199 (Selangor), or 00 603 6258 0000 (Kuala Lumpur) or 00 607 278 0088 (Johor Bahru). Or visit www.damansarafertility.com
Cost: From £2,000-£2,200 per IVF cycle (including all tests and consultations) plus return flights and hotels.
Down time: Allow four-five weeks in Malaysia.
UK cost: Around £2,000-£3,000 per cycle (not including consultations, tests, analysis, etc. which can add up to another £500-£1,000).
NHS waiting time: Can be up to two years, depending on where you live. Only one cycle of IVF is available on the NHS (many infertile couples need around three), No IVF on the NHS for women over 40.

SPINAL SURGERY: INDIA

Why: The quality of the treatment and state-of-the-art hospitals have made India an excellent option for a wide range of medical procedures. Increasing numbers of Britons are going there for spinal surgery — particularly artificial disc replacement, which is not commonly available in the UK (particularly on the NHS) because of a lack of specially trained surgeons. The procedure involves inserting an artificial component into the spine and results in greater mobility for patients than disc fusion, commonly practised in the UK. Good English is spoken by 90 per cent of hospital staff.
Why not: It's a nine-hour flight and you may not want to be cramped into economy class after an orthopaedic operation. Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is always a threat on long-haul travel and you must make sure any tropical medication, such as malaria tablets will have no adverse effect on your surgical treatment.
How: The Taj Medical Group is a British-based firm which specialises in packages to top-rated Indian hospitals. Tel 0800 1076 360 or visit www.tajmedicalgroup.co.uk
Cost: £2,500-3,000 for discectomy. £5,000-£5,500 for spinal fusion, artificial disc replacement £4,000-£5,000, plus £800 for flights plus a two-week post-operative stay in a three or four-star hotel.
Down time: Spinal surgery requires an average of eight to ten days in hospital and you will also need to spend a fortnight convalescing in a hotel partly because you are not allowed to make long-haul flights directly after surgery and also for post-operative check-ups.
UK cost: discectomy £6,000, spinal fusion £18,000, knee replacement £8,000-£12,000.
NHS waiting time: Can be up to 12 months, depending on where you live, after MRI scans and consultations with surgeons.

CASE STUDY

HEIDI ROGERS, 47, (left), is an A&E nurse in Hastings, East Sussex. She lives with her husband, Peter, 52, a businessman, in Battle. They have three children, Emma, 22, Victoria, 20, and Oliver, 16, and eight grandchildren. She says:

I'D BEEN suffering with a bad back for the past six years but tried to get on with things as best I could. My job as a nurse involves a lot of lifting and I also care for my 94-year-old grandmother, so I just took painkillers. Then, about 18 months ago, I felt something go. After an MRI scan in Britain, which found nothing wrong, I got in touch with the Taj Medical Group in Delhi to arrange a consultation.
Last December, I flew to Delhi and had a full-body check, an MRI and a consultation with both a medical and an orthopaedic doctor. The whole thing cost £1,000 — the same price as an MRI in the UK, and I finally had my diagnosis: a slipped disc. The surgeon suggested a pioneering spinal disc replacement procedure — something that would cost £33,000 in the UK. My husband and I arrived back in India on Thursday, January 26, and the operation was done the following Wednesday. The care was amazing and the bill, including our flights and hotel, came to £6,000. As a nurse, I can say that the level of care was truly fantastic.

■ *FOR more information, visit surgeryindia.co.uk, or call 0800 1076 360.*

DENTAL WORK: HUNGARY

Why: Hungary has more dentists per head of population than any other European country — and the prices are much cheaper than in the UK. Even after flights and accommodation, you'll still save around 50 per cent of the cost of similar surgery in the UK. Budapest has brand new state-of-the-art dental clinics and highly regarded dentists.
Most Hungarian dentists will be able to start work on the day of your consultation.
Why not: If anything goes wrong you would find yourself either commuting back and forth to Hungary to get it fixed. A British dentist may refuse to treat anyone who's had treatment abroad or may charge you high fees. Some British dentists criticise the wisdom of performing work over a shorter time period.
How: Perfect Profiles, www.perfectprofiles.eu.com, 0870 1280 636, and Smile Savers Hungary, 020 7385 2742, www.smile-saversthungary.co.uk both offer dental packages to Hungary.
Cost: Around £80 per canal for root canal, £180-£230 for a full porcelain crown, £580 for implant, £400 for full lower or upper jaw of dentures, plus flights and accommodation.
Down time: A one-week stay is usually enough for most crown and bridge work, although implants require a ten to 12-day stay with a return visit after about four-six months.
UK cost: Root canal — £300-£700 per tooth, porcelain crowns £400-£800 each, implants £1,500-£2,500 per tooth, £1,500-£2,000 for upper or lower jaw dentures.
NHS waiting time: So long as you are registered with an NHS dentist, you will generally get your first appointment within a week. However, workloads mean a number of visits, over many weeks, may be necessary.

■ *EXTRACTED from The Complete Medical Tourist by David Hancock, (John Blake £9.99). To order a copy at £7.99 (inc p&p), call 020 7381 0666.*

Pictures: WARREN SMITH, NICK SUKNIKS and PAUL ARMIGER

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