

A growing number of people are travelling abroad for faster, cheaper medical treatment.

By Emma Lunn

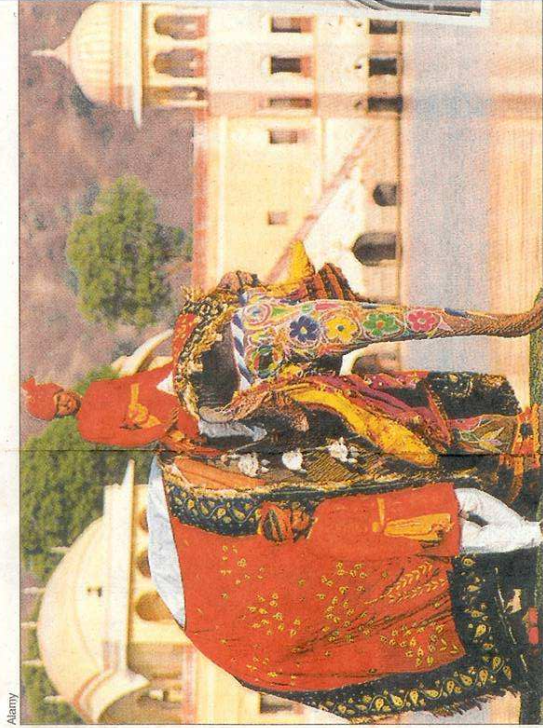
LONG waiting lists in the NHS and expensive private treatment mean that hip replacements are becoming as popular as hip resorts for Brits travelling abroad.

Norwich Union Healthcare's health-of-the-nation index reported last week that 74% of GPs said they were seeing more of their patients travelling abroad for operations because of dissatisfaction with British waiting lists. Popular destinations include India, Costa Rica, South Africa, Germany, America and Thailand.

Cost is another big factor in people going abroad for operations, leading to a "sun and surgery" package-break industry. Companies with links to hospitals around the world arrange deals that include an operation, travel and accommodation.

Heidi Rogers, 47, and her daughter, Victoria Lamberth, 29, travelled to India with the Taj Medical Group for Rogers to have an operation on a slipped disc and Lamberth to have dental treatment.

Rogers said: "I had problems with back pain and it turned out



Alamy

Passage to India: Heidi Rogers with the doctor who carried out her back operation in Delhi



## New rush to foreign hospitals

to be a slipped disc. There was a long waiting list for treatment on the NHS and I couldn't afford to go private on my nurse's salary."

She needed an MRI scan, which costs about £1,000 privately in Britain, but without a consultation, appointment or

diagnosis. The same scan costs only £100 in India with consultation and diagnosis included, so she flew to Delhi last December to have it done.

Rogers returned to Britain hoping that the orthopaedic consultant at Conquest Hospital in Hastings, where she works,

would be able to treat her. But all he could do was put her on a waiting list for an injection that would relieve the pain — not solve the problem.

She said: "In January I went back to Delhi with my husband and daughter. I had a new procedure in which they replaced

the disc. The trip and treatment came to about £4,400.

"I'm not sure if they do disc replacement yet in Britain, but most orthopaedic operations cost about £15,000."

At the same time her daughter had extensive dental treatment for which she was quoted

£6,000 in Britain. In India she had it all done for £800.

"I'm free of pain for the first time in ages," said Rogers, "and my daughter's mouth now looks beautiful."

Logistics specialises in sending patients to France, where a hip

replacement and two-week stay costs £6,350, half the amount it would cost privately in Britain.

"We've got a 100% track record," said People Logistics director Keith Smith, "and most people are walking unaided by the time they come out of the hospital. We drive patients to France through the Channel tunnel, because it's not a good idea to fly soon after surgery."

The website, treatmentabroad.net, provides information to help people decide about travelling abroad for surgery.

"Doctors and nurses are cheaper in other countries, and some equipment costs less," said Keith Pollard, another director. "Also, if the currency is weak against the pound, you can get some stunning deals."

He reckons you could save between £2,000 and £4,000 by travelling to the continent for treatment for some conditions.

Belgium is a common destination because it is only a couple of hours away from London and accessible via Eurostar for less than £50 return. The average cost of a gastric bypass is £11,800 in Britain, but only £4,995 in Belgium. A knee replacement costs about £10,300 in this country but only £6,500 in Belgium.

If it's cosmetic surgery you are after, most countries charge about half what you would have to pay in Britain. A nose job

costs between £3,000 and £4,000 in a British private hospital and slightly less in a cosmetic-surgery clinic.

But having an operation is never risk-free, and there can be additional dangers in travelling abroad for treatment.

Dr Ann Robinson, one of the GPs who contributed to the NU Healthcare report, warned that if surgery does not go smoothly, complications may mean you have to extend your trip.

She said: "If major complications keep you in hospital for longer than you thought, or prevent you flying home, you could have the expense of a longer hospital stay or finding accommodation before you fly home. And the daily cost of living may be more than at home."

Worse still, if things go badly wrong and you want to sue the hospital or surgeon, you have to do it through the courts of the country where you had the operation, using a foreign lawyer and foreign legal system.

A report by McKinsey & Co consultants last year said medical tourism in India would be a £2 billion business by 2012. You can see why when you consider that the cost of treatment in India is much less than in Britain, and the doctors have often trained or worked in British hospitals. The equipment they use is usually the same.

A knee operation in Britain can cost upwards of £10,000 but can be bought for about £4,000 in India, including travel and accommodation.

Such is the growing demand for foreigners seeking surgery that the Indian government has introduced a medical visa, which costs £50 and lets you return to the country up to four times in a year for check-ups and post-operative care.

**Checklist if you're thinking of having surgery abroad:**

- Factor in the cost of flights before deciding on a destination. Travel to Europe is obviously much cheaper than India.
- Think about how long you will need to stay — you may not be fit to fly home for days or weeks after an operation.
- Check your surgeon's credentials and whether action has ever been taken against him or her by the country's equivalent of the General Medical Council.
- Investigate your chosen hospital's record for cleanliness and infection.
- Consider whether language will be an issue.

**More information:**

people-logistics.com (0800 587 9501); treatmentabroad.net; tajmedicalgroup.co.uk (0800 1076 360).

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