Cosmetic Tourism: Public Opinion and Analysis of Information and Content Available on the Internet

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Abstract

Background: The medical tourism market is a rapidly growing sector fueled by increasing health care costs, longer domestic waiting times, economic recession, and cheaper air travel.

Objectives: The authors investigate public opinion on undergoing cosmetic surgery abroad and then explore the information patients are likely to encounter on the Internet when searching for such services.

Methods: A poll of 197 members of the general public was conducted in the United Kingdom. An Internet search including the terms plastic surgery abroad was conducted, and the first 100 relevant sites were reviewed.

Results: Of the 197 respondents, 47% had considered having some form of cosmetic surgery. Most (97%) would consider going abroad for their procedure. The Internet was a source of information for 70%. The review of the first 100 sites under “plastic surgery abroad” revealed that most centers were located in Eastern Europe (26%), South America (14%), and the Far East (11%). Exploring the information provided on the Web sites, we found 37% contained no information regarding procedures. Only 10% of sites contained any information about potential complications. Even less frequently mentioned (4%) were details of aftercare or follow-up procedures.

Conclusions: The authors found that the overwhelming majority of respondents considering plastic surgery would also consider seeking cosmetic surgical treatment abroad. The Internet sites that appear most prominently in an online search contained a distinct lack of information for potential patients, particularly with regard to complications and aftercare. There is, therefore, a need for improved public awareness and education about the considerations inherent in medical tourism. The introduction of more stringent regulations for international centers providing such services should also be considered to help safeguard patients.

Keywords

cosmetic surgery, tourism, public, Internet, marketing

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The medical tourism market is a rapidly expanding sector, with projections that it will grow to a $21 billion-per-year industry by 2012. The number of Americans seeking surgery abroad was around 750,000 in 2007, but is predicted to reach 6 million by 2010 and up to 10 million by 2012. The cosmetic surgery segment accounts for a major proportion of this medical tourism market. Increasing health care costs, longer waiting times, economic recession, and cheaper air travel have helped fuel the demand for medical tourism. Increased accessibility to the Internet has also provided unprecedented marketing opportunities for clinics seeking patients. A survey of over 1300 International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) members highlighted that 56% considered the growth of cosmetic tourism as today’s reality, whereas 25.4% thought it was a dangerous trend. Concerns have been voiced about postoperative care and complications arising from surgery abroad and their impact on local health resources in the United Kingdom. The American Society for Aesthetic
Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) and ISAPS have produced guidelines and question sets to assist patients who are considering travel for surgery abroad (see Appendices A and B for a full list).\textsuperscript{4,5}

We report on the results of a poll to investigate the public’s opinion on undergoing cosmetic surgery abroad and explore the information patients are likely to encounter on the Internet when searching for such services. We compare this information with the ASAPS and ISAPS guidelines to determine whether their criteria are being addressed by service providers.

**METHODS**

A poll of the general public was conducted in a local retail center in the United Kingdom. The authors approached 200 members of the general public with a questionnaire about whether they had ever considered having cosmetic surgery. The subjects were then asked if they had ever researched this topic on the Internet and whether they would consider going abroad for surgery. Those who would consider surgery abroad were questioned about why and whom would they contact if complications should arise.

An Internet search for the term *plastic surgery abroad* was then conducted with a popular search engine. The first 100 relevant sites were reviewed. Duplicate, nonrelevant sites were excluded from analysis. The country of origin was noted for each site. The site content was reviewed with respect to procedural information, complications, and aftercare. The credentials of surgeons and governing body registration were also noted. Last, the marketing strategies employed by the centers offering surgery were explored.

**RESULTS**

**Opinion Poll**

The response rate was 98.5%, with only three people wishing not to participate. Of the 197 people, 47% had considered having some form of cosmetic surgery. Within this group, 97% stated they would consider having their procedure abroad. Seventy percent had accessed the Internet as a source of information when researching cosmetic surgery. Among those who would consider surgery abroad, the most frequent reason given was lower costs (88.3%). Almost one-fifth (18.1%) said they would consider surgery abroad because it would also be a vacation opportunity. When asked whom they would contact if a complication should arise, 61.4% stated they would see their local health service. Only 36.5% said that they would contact the operating surgeon.

**Internet Search**

Geographically, Europe accounted for almost half (49%) of centers outside of the United Kingdom offering cosmetic surgery on our Internet search. Most of these centers were located in Eastern Europe (26%) and Spain (7%). Other regions with a frequent number of centers included South America (14%) and the Far East (11%).

An analysis of the consultation methods employed by centers revealed that 45% offered a UK-based face-to-face consultation. It was, however, unclear from information provided whether this was with the operating surgeon, a trained nurse, or a salesperson. Most Web sites (57%) provided alternative methods of consultation such as email, telephone, or online chat. Free consultations were readily advertised on 61% of sites.

Exploring the information provided on the Web sites, we found 37% contained no information regarding the procedures offered. Only 10% of sites contained any information about potential complications. Even less frequently mentioned (4%) were details of aftercare or follow-up procedures should complications arise. Details regarding surgeons’ credentials revealed that 83% were registered by local medical governing bodies. Only 7% of surgeons were registered by the UK governing body, the General Medical Council; of these, only two were on the specialist register for plastic surgery.

Many marketing strategies were employed by these centers to attract new clients. As previously mentioned, 61% offered free consultations. On 20% of the sites, financial and loan arrangements were readily provided. One site contained a loan calculator on its front page, to allow clients to calculate monthly repayments. Incentives were also offered for friend and family referrals, including direct cash payments. A smaller number of sites directly promoted reductions for multiple or combined procedures (14%). Travel and accommodation deals were offered by some sites, including local tours and postoperative recovery packages. Publication of low infection rates was also a method of promotion by some clinics.

**DISCUSSION**

The cosmetic tourism market is rapidly growing and access to these services is now easier than ever before. Our study has shown that almost all of our survey respondents (97%) who had previously considered plastic surgery would also consider going abroad for their procedure, the primary reason being cost. Also, the majority (70%) of potential patients seek information from the Internet.

As the potential for medical tourism rapidly strengthens, professional cosmetic surgery societies have begun to address the need for accurate, detailed patient and provider information. ASAPS and ISAPS each have provided a series of questions to be considered and answered when a patient is contemplating traveling abroad for surgery (see Appendices A and B).\textsuperscript{5,5} Based on the results of our Internet search, our study has highlighted that a number of these factors are not readily addressed in the majority of cosmetic tourism Web sites.

For example, the credentials of the operating surgeon should be explored carefully before traveling for surgery. In our study, 83% were registered medical practitioners in
their local countries, but the surgeons’ training or operative experience was not mentioned on most of these Web sites. Only two surgeons were noted to be certified plastic surgeons, recognized by the General Medical Council. Although patient testimonials were provided by 54% of Web sites, the ISAPS and ASAPS guidelines recommend checking these references personally.

Direct communication with the center is also highlighted as being important. Our study found that less than half of centers (45%) offered face-to-face consultations. It was unclear even in these cases whether these face-to-face consultations were with the operating surgeon or another representative. Most (57%) offered alternative methods of consultation such as telephone, email, or Web-based methods. However, patients seeking cosmetic surgery should be appropriately counseled preoperatively. A face-to-face consultation with the operating surgeon should be an essential part of the initial patient journey.

Understanding the procedure and its potential complications is also an important part of the decision-making process. Almost two-thirds of Web sites contained information about their procedures, but details relating to complications and aftercare were infrequent. Only 10% of the sites we viewed highlighted potential complications, and only 4% provided information about aftercare procedures if complications arose. In our survey, a high proportion (61.4%) of those interviewed stated that they would seek treatment from their local health service rather than contacting the operating surgeon in the event of complications. This has considerable implications for local health care services and resources.

A survey of plastic surgeons in the Pan Thames region of the United Kingdom found that, in 2006, around 60% of surgeons had seen patients with complications resulting from cosmetic tourism. This survey found that 66% of these patients required emergency inpatient admission. A further survey of 203 plastic surgeons in the United Kingdom found that 37% had seen patients with complications from surgery abroad in 2007. This study also highlighted concerns regarding the strain cosmetic tourism can place on finances and resources in local healthcare. In their guidelines, ASAPS has also highlighted potential complications relating to travel after surgery, such as thromboembolism. These are often neglected and should also be considered.

We suggest that the marketing strategies employed by cosmetic tourism centers should be scrutinized and perhaps even regulated. Of particular concern is the offer of multiple procedures at discounted rates, which could expose patients to significantly higher risks. Provision of readily accessible financing options, seen on 20% of the Web sites reviewed, could also be financially harmful to patients in the current economic climate.

CONCLUSIONS

The global market is becoming more competitive and cosmetic surgery tourism is growing. Our data show that many patients considering cosmetic surgery would also consider traveling abroad for their procedure, primarily as a way to reduce costs. Many patients seek information about procedures (and cosmetic tourism) online, and a review of Internet content revealed that many important factors highlighted in the ASAPS and ISAPS guidelines for patients considering cosmetic surgery abroad are not addressed. There is, therefore, a need for improved public awareness and education about the unique considerations patients face when traveling for cosmetic surgery. The introduction of stringent and consistent regulations for centers providing such services should be considered to safeguard patients.

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REFERENCES

APPENDIX A
American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) Guidelines for Patients Seeking Cosmetic Surgery Abroad

The following questions were created to help you through the process and should be answered before boarding the plane:

- Unless you have met the surgeon on a prior visit and have seen the surgery facility, how do you know that you will be comfortable with him or her, and feel secure in proceeding with surgery? Remember, a successful doctor-patient relationship is based on confidence and trust, not on perceived savings and price. Make sure you are fully comfortable with the surgeon providing your care.

- What are the risks of long flights and any additional land travel before and after surgery? Will travel have an impact on my surgical outcome? Will I have to stay longer at the tourist destination to decrease the risk of post-surgical deep vein thrombosis (DVT) before I get on a plane?

- Is there an increased risk of DVT in the legs or pulmonary embolism (blood clots in the lungs) associated with long air travel before and after surgery?

- What is the surgeon’s training? Be sure that your physician has specific training in cosmetic surgery procedures through an accredited plastic surgery residency program and/or fellowship.

- What specialty certification does the surgeon hold? The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (www.isaps.org) is a good source for finding qualified cosmetic surgeons.

- What happens if you develop complications? Make sure you know who will care for you and who is financially responsible for secondary or revisional procedures. Before you leave home, check with a local Board-Certified Plastic Surgeon to see if they will be willing to provide postoperative or revisional care if necessary.

- If you feel the surgeon has been negligent, what recourse will you have? Find out in advance what liability coverage the physician holds and what the local laws are regarding medical malpractice.

- What are the local standards of anesthesia and nursing care? What credentials do these providers hold and what are the standards of the credentials?

- Is there an acute care hospital nearby if complications should arise? Is it a fully licensed, modern facility?

- What physician will care for you at home if complications arise?

- What are the surgeon’s recommendations for aftercare? How long after your procedure will you need to stay in the area? Who will care for you in your initial recovery? What are the costs for this postoperative care?

- Do the key personnel at the surgeon’s office and in the operating room speak fluent English?

- Carefully consider the total costs involved with having surgery abroad, including the additional time off work required for travel and recovery, the costs of air travel and extended stays abroad, potential costs if surgery revisions are needed subsequently, and unanticipated expenses if complications occur.

Available at http://www.surgery.org/consumers/consumer-resources/consumer-tips
APPENDIX B
The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) Key Guidelines for Plastic Surgery Travelers

What is the surgeon’s training?
A gynecologist performing a breast augmentation or a dermatologist doing a facelift are not appropriate choices.

Is the plastic surgeon certified?
The ISAPS website lists the names and addresses of over 1,600 certified plastic surgeons in 84 countries. Ask for certification information and who the certifying body is.

Does your personal health insurance cover you outside your country?
Most health insurance providers do not cover individuals for surgery performed outside their own country. Consider obtaining International Medical Coverage that may be available through your insurance agent.

What about aftercare?
Patients should stay in the area where the surgery was performed for at least one week, depending on the procedure. Find out in advance where you will stay and if this facility is prepared to care for your postoperative needs.

What about complications?
What doctor will care for you at home if you have complications and who will pay for secondary or revision procedures?

Do the key personnel at the surgeon’s office speak your language fluently?
If you cannot be easily understood, be prepared for complications.

With whom are you communicating?
You should be talking directly with the doctor’s staff and the doctor. A travel agent should only make travel and accommodations arrangements.

Is the surgeon a member of recognized national and international societies?
ISAPS membership is by invitation and is granted to applicants only after extensive screening.

Have you checked for references?
Ask for names and contact information of patients who have recently had a similar procedure and contact them about their experience with the surgeon, their staff, aftercare facilities, and postoperative follow-up.

Available at http://www.isaps.org/mtourism.php?subsection=key