



# home or AWAY

*Cosmetic-enhancement procedures may seem temptingly affordable in some international holiday destinations, but beware the hidden costs.*

BY RICKY ALLEN

Travelling for medical treatment has become so common that it has its own name – medical tourism.

The global medical tourism market is worth an estimated US\$24–40 billion per year, according to the American-based company Patients Beyond Borders, which notes that estimates for the

emerging industry vary widely. The biggest growth area within the medical tourism industry is cosmetic enhancement, which includes surgical and non-surgical procedures as well as cosmetic dental work.

The popularity of venturing abroad for medical procedures, especially surgery, has grown and

evolved rapidly since the GFC.

It's interesting to note that before the GFC, optimal results were generally a patient's primary concern, while post-GFC, price has become the first consideration for many. Patients who take part in medical tourism often become result-focused only after the fact.

Top medical-tourism destinations for Australians include Bali, Thailand, Bangkok and the Philippines. But in recent years, numerous new clinics and hospitals have opened in other parts of Asia, ready to cash in on the developing market.

Most of the companies marketing medical tourism offer all-inclusive packages, which cover everything from the cost of procedures to airfares, meals and accommodation. A person could not fail to be taken in by the beautiful pictures of lush tropical settings and sparkling oceans featured in much of the marketing, along with the savings on price, of course.

These kinds of companies often trivialise medical procedures so much that patients are made to feel that the experience will be much like going to the mall for a day of shopping. But, unfortunately, it doesn't matter where you go to have them done; medical procedures, both surgical and non-surgical, carry risks.

My first real understanding of the medical tourism industry came through a good friend, a very well-educated and well-off woman who, unknown to me, had gone to

Asia and had cosmetic dentistry. Shortly after she returned from her trip, we were out to dinner with a group of people and my friend had ordered steak. Next thing I noticed, these white things landed on her plate, four of them in quick succession. My friend jumped up and hurriedly left the restaurant. She'd just lost the veneers that she had gotten done abroad.

When she got to a dentist the next day, my friend learned that losing the veneers was the least of her

problems. She is still having remedial work done three years later.

If the figures available from Australian doctors are at all accurate, the scary reality is that only approximately 30 per cent of medical tourists who have

cosmetic-enhancement procedures performed overseas are happy with the result. If any doctor in Australia had such a high dissatisfaction rate, he or she would be forced to close their practice.

Yet medical tourism remains particularly popular, in part because of its proximity to Asia, in Western Australia where, according to some local doctors, fixing problems on patients who have undergone procedures abroad has become a rapidly growing business.

## CASE STUDY: botched breast augmentation

Dr \_\_\_\_\_, a plastic surgeon from \_\_\_\_\_ NSW, has found that the number of referrals he is receiving for patients who have experienced problems as a result of cosmetic enhancements undertaken abroad is growing alarmingly. He recently saw a 25-year-old woman who was on holidays overseas when she was offered a deal for a breast-augmentation procedure. She went to the theatre having just met the doctor the day before and knowing only that he would be putting in the augments via her armpits. As soon as she got back to the hotel after the surgery, the patient became

concerned as her breasts were different sizes and very painful. She rang the clinic and was told that these symptoms were normal and she would be fine. When Dr \_\_\_\_\_ saw her six months later, she had a myriad of problems, including severe capsular contracture, which is rare at that stage and can often occur as a result of a bleed around the implant or inadequate cleanliness during the procedure. The patient had been in pain since her surgery and opted to undergo implant removal and reinsertion less than a year after her original procedure was performed.

The Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons is closely monitoring the growth of offshore cosmetic enhancement and suggests that patients do their homework very carefully before signing on the dotted line.

If price is a deciding factor, prospective medical tourists should take into account not only the cost of the procedure itself but also all potential additional expenses, such as hospital fees and other post-operative charges.

## CHECKLIST

**Compiled by the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons, this checklist is a must for anyone planning overseas cosmetic enhancement.**

1. Is your surgeon a member of the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery? This means they have some form of recognised qualification.
2. Do you have all of the information you want and have you had enough time to make an informed decision?
3. Are the medical standards of care and the testing and quality control requirements at your destination at least as good as those in Australia?
4. Do the implants, devices and products used in your chosen hospital or clinic meet Australian standards?
5. Do you have a plan for what you will do in case of post-operative problems? Is the person promoting the surgery medically trained, and do they provide any help if problems arise, or are they simply a travel agent or broker?

**Members of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons are trained and accredited plastic surgeons. For further details, call the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons information hotline on 1300 367 446 or visit [www.plasticsurgery.org.au](http://www.plasticsurgery.org.au).**