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## Cost-saving surgery lures 'medical tourists' abroad

Overseas care especially attractive to uninsured

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P-I REPORTER

Phil Lundstrom knew he needed surgery, but he didn't know how he was going to pay for it.

A broken nose had left him with a deviated septum that made breathing difficult -- especially at night.

Lundstrom and his wife, Shannon, run a picture-framing business in Federal Way. As small-business owners, they have health insurance, but their coverage isn't great. An \$8,000 deductible means they pay out of pocket for most doctors visits.

When Lundstrom learned his surgery would cost upward of \$10,000, he started thinking outside the boundaries of U.S. health care.

He became one of an estimated tens of thousands of Americans traveling abroad as part of a fast-growing but controversial phenomenon known as medical tourism. Although the practice has become wildly popular, it also has prompted words of caution from experts who say going to another country for medical care can be risky.

To be sure, there are excellent facilities throughout the world, but the standard of care and infection control can vary. If something goes wrong, a patient's legal recourse could be limited by a lack of malpractice laws. And what about follow-up care?

But given the exorbitant -- and ever-rising -- cost of health care in the United States, the search for cheaper options can make sense, especially for the estimated 46 million Americans who don't have insurance.


"I don't think it's necessarily bad. I think it's a reality. But it's completely unregulated, which kind of makes me worried," said Dr. Ann Marie Kimball, professor of global health at the University of Washington. "It's a phenomenon of our new mobility that I think we have to catch up with. We're woefully behind."

Earlier this month, Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., held hearings on the subject and called for the creation of an interagency government task force to study potential safety issues for U.S. patients.

"This trend of traveling abroad for medical care raised a lot of questions, most importantly patient safety," Smith said in a statement.

But for Lundstrom, the experience was entirely positive. With the help of MedRetreat, a Washington, D.C.-based business that arranges trips overseas for medical procedures, the Lundstroms traveled to Malaysia in May. Phil had his surgery, plus a physical and a colonoscopy. Shannon had a mammogram and a full physical. They stayed in a top resort and toured the island.



 Gilbert W. Arias / P-I

Phil and Shannon Lundstrom, who own a picture-framing business in Federal Way, have an \$8,000 health insurance deductible. When Phil needed surgery for a deviated septum, he had it done in Malaysia.

The whole trip cost less than \$4,000 (they used frequent-flier miles for their plane tickets).

"We're just telling everybody we know about this because we're just so sick of this high cost (of health care) that doesn't have to be," Shannon Lundstrom said.

Although no solid numbers exist to track the popularity of medical tourism, companies that arrange the trips say their business is booming.

The combination of tourism and medical care also means big money for countries such as India and Thailand, both of which aggressively market their hospitals to foreign customers.

The trips are touted by foreign hospitals and agencies that arrange them in the U.S. and Europe as a budget medical option and an exotic vacation all in one. Web sites feature couples lounging in hammocks, sunsets on the beach, temples and parrots.

Procedures generally cost between 50 percent and 80 percent less than they do in the United States, said Sabrina Bharaj, spokeswoman for MedSolution, a Vancouver, B.C. -based company that arranges medical trips.

In the past several years, trip organizers say, more patients have been pursuing not just elective and cosmetic surgeries, but also medically necessary procedures, including hip and knee replacements, angioplasty and hysterectomies.

MedRetreat offers a menu of 183 procedures in seven countries -- India, Thailand, Malaysia, Brazil, Argentina, Turkey and South Africa.

The Lundstroms had heard from friends about successful medical care in other countries, but when they saw a feature about the trend on the CBS program "60 Minutes" last fall, they started thinking about the option more seriously.

"We've been hearing about overseas medical treatment from friends who've spent 10 years sailing around the world," Shannon Lundstrom said. "The seed was planted that way."



Andrew Saeger / P-I

MedRetreat recommended a plastic surgeon in Malaysia who went to college in Walla Walla and medical school at Harvard University. He practiced in the United States for 25 years before returning to Malaysia, Lundstrom said.

"The thing I really liked about (MedRetreat) was that they had been to all these places," Lundstrom said.

The Lundstroms said MedRetreat called to follow up after they returned home and connected them with a liaison while they were in Malaysia.

"It's not as if you come home and they don't know your name," Shannon Lundstrom said.

MedSolution's package includes transportation to and from the airport and all related medical costs, including the surgeon, anesthesiologists, nurses, operating room and intensive care.

The company is paid by the hospital for bookings.

The Vancouver, B.C., company also insists a patient's primary care provider be informed and provide medical records to surgeons in other countries.

"We want them to see their family doctor and let them know what's going on," Bharaj said.

Phil Lundstrom said he wasn't concerned that his local doctor didn't communicate with the surgeon in Malaysia.

"I pretty much knew it was probably going to be a straightforward thing," Lundstrom said.

But what if it's not?

"I think you have to ask the disastrous questions," said the UW's Kimball. "The first question would be, what if it doesn't work? What happens? What if there are complications from anesthesia?"

"Say you die on the table. What happens then? ... What about an autopsy, culpability, damages? What about my family?"

Jeff Schult, author of "Beauty From Afar," a guide to medical tourism, said legal options vary according to each country's malpractice laws.

"My sort of blunt advice is that if your primary concern in going to a doctor, surgeon or dentist is whether or not you're going to have legal recourse if you don't like the work you get, you shouldn't go overseas," Schult said.

In May, The Providence (R.I.) Journal reported that a Rhode Island woman died of a blood clot in India four days after she received a breast reduction and tummy tuck. She found Wockhardt Hospital in Bombay online and arranged with the hospital for her trip.

Her sister, Elizabeth Wright, said she didn't blame the hospital, according to The Journal. "It was a freak accident," Wright said.

"I truly believe that. They did not do a bad operation."

Bharaj of MedSolution said it would be up to the family to arrange for their loved one's remains.

"Obviously we would assist them with anything," said Bharaj, but deaths are "not something we've looked into. It's not something that we've ever foreseen happening or planned for."

## **BUYER BEWARE**

Medical tourism is a largely unregulated industry, so prospective customers should take a "buyer beware" attitude and get as much information as possible:

- If the agency is based in the United States, check it out with the local Better Business Bureau.
- It can be difficult to evaluate the training and credentials of medical practitioners outside the United States. To find out if the hospital you are considering is accredited by Joint Commission International, a branch of the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, go to [www.jointcommissionInternational.org](http://www.jointcommissionInternational.org). The agency's accreditation is based on patient care standards.
- Remember that despite promises of a vacation, the medical procedure could limit your activities.
- Required follow-up care could be unavailable.
- Legal recourse could be difficult if things go wrong.

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