More Patients Seeking Medical Care Outside U.S.

WASHINGTON — The emergence of medical centers in Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe that provide state-of-the-art procedures with a human touch and a gentle price tag has many U.S. citizens flying abroad to seek care they might have sought at their local hospitals.

Medical travel—don’t call it medical tourism anymore—has increased rapidly in recent years. In principle, there’s nothing really new about it. For years, wealthy individuals from all over the world have flown to the United States or Western Europe for advanced procedures not available at home.

What is new is the ease of medical travel, the numbers of people getting treated away from home, and the direction: away from the U.S. and toward Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

Last year, roughly 150,000 Americans headed overseas for surgical procedures, estimated Josef Woodward, author of “Patients Without Borders: Everybody’s Guide to Affordable, World-Class Medical Tourism” (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Healthy Travel Media, 2007) the first, but surely not the last, popular book on the subject. His estimate is conservative: some observers put the number at closer to half a million.

Roughly 60,000 Americans have sought care at Bumrungrad International in Bangkok, widely recognized as one of Asia’s leading hospitals, according to Curt Schroeder, group CEO of Bumrungrad.

“Why travel to a hospital you can’t even pronounce, in a country you’ve never visited, with doctors who have strange names you can’t spell? There are several reasons: geopolitical factors; economic crises; lack of access to care, which is especially true for uninsured Americans or people from Western Europe who do not want to wait for services provided through their national health care systems; perceived lack of quality of care in their home countries; and family microeconomics,” said Mr. Schroeder, who previously was with Tenet Healthcare Systems, opening Tenet hospitals in several different countries.

Health care abroad is an appealing option for middle-income Americans who are not insured. But even those with insurance are feeling the pinch and looking overseas. Mr. Schroeder cited a Time magazine survey indicating that 61% of uninsured Americans polled would walk 10,000 miles if they knew they could save $5,000 on a major medical procedure. Among those with insurance, the number was 40%.

“These are the first wave of medical tourists,” he said.

U.S. Standards … Better

According to Ori Kavee, head of United-HealthGroup’s Ovations program to improve health in people over age 50 years, there are 110 hospitals around the world accredited by the Joint Commission. In international, that provide as good if not better quality health care than what is available at top U.S. hospitals.

JCI uses the same criteria as the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), and serves the same general purpose.

JCI-accredited hospitals, many of which are run as joint government-private sector partnerships provide services at far lower cost than U.S. hospitals. And American- or European-accredited clinics at JCI-accredited hospitals are performing cardiovascular surgery, organ transplants, and hip and knee replacements with outcomes equivalent to any U.S. center and adverse event rates comparable with or even substantially lower than at U.S. hospitals.

Mr. Woodward estimates Americans traveling for health care can expect to save between 15% and 85% on the cost of equivalent care in the United States. Savings vary widely with the type of procedure, the country visited, and any add-ons such as the duration of stay or for most major procedures the savings are massive.

(See box.)

Brazilians, Costa Ricans, and South Africans currently benefit the most from medical tourism, especially if pushed from the home front by U.S. insurers, could have a major impact on American health care systems, but Dr. Lefko said, “it’s a matter of time before U.S. insurers start actively driving patients overseas, predicted Jeffrey Lefko, a Chica-

A Medical Travel Hot Spot: Singapore

When it comes to medical travel, Singapore presents a classic case of supply and demand, Dr. Yap said at the World Health Care Congress.

Singapore’s tertiary-care hospitals have excess capacity that they’re trying to fill. “We have a very small population, and on our own we are not able to maintain the state-of-the-art services. So our approach is to fill the service volume with international patients. That way we can acquire the technology, keep the specialists, and provide the highest quality services.”

Dr. Yap, medical director of the Singapore Tourism Board, said he believes a lot of the unease surrounding these trends is unwarranted.

“Singapore’s share of the global health care economy is about $12.6 billion. The U.S. share is about $2.000 billion. Even if you quadrupled our capacity and you threw it in, too, we’re not even able to come close to filling all the rooms. It’s a very small fraction,” he said at the World Health Care Congress.

He added that a little bit of healthy competition from abroad might have a potentially positive structural impact on how the U.S. delivers health care services.”

Dr. Lefko said he believes the emergence of world-class health care systems across the Pacific will likely give U.S. hospitals and clinics a much-needed kick in the bedpan.

Already 500,000 Americans each year are leaving the U.S. for health care reasons, and this is going to grow. U.S. hospitals and doctors will complain, but the reality is, U.S. hospitals have had plenty of time to straighten out their acts. They’ve had plenty of opportunities to create better, more economical health care services. Medical tourism’s going to level the playing field. “I believe Singapore is growing. Even without major marketing effort, we’re seeing an increase in U.S. and U.K. patients,” he said at the World Health Care Congress.

Dr. Yap added that this approach represents a strong shift away from the stereotype of medical tourism, which used to mean elective or commodity surgery at facilities with uncertain quality records, questionable marketing methods, and an absence of care continuity.

Medical travel involves patients going abroad for needed medical care, with minimal leisure components.

This is essential health care that, for whatever reason, the individual cannot access at home,” he stressed that medical teams in Singapore are better able to fill the part of the normal care continuum and to develop good interconnectivity with the patient’s doctors at home.

“We prefer that physicians in the patients’ home country refer the patient to us. We’re not trying to pull patients away from their home doctors.”