

MEDICAL TOURISM

Vietnam: just what the doctor ordered

Skincare treatments in Vietnamese clinics can be booked around sightseeing trips, with savings of up to 70 per cent on prices elsewhere.
Photo: AFP

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Vietnam's health care has undergone a revolution in recent years as luxurious hospitals, dental clinics and cosmetic centres continue to proliferate to cater for a rapidly growing domestic and international market.

The International Medical Insurance Journal lists Malaysia, India, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and South Korea as the most popular medical tourism destinations in Asia. Thailand and Singapore lead the charge, together accounting for 64 per cent of the Asian market in 2008.

But Vietnam is shaping up to be a top regional competitor. There are no official figures, but local centres say their business is increasing between 50 per cent and 100 per cent a year.

"Our practice has grown 60 per cent every 12 months," says Dr Wade Brackenbury, who established the American Chiropractic Clinic in Ho Chi Minh City six years ago. "About 20 per cent of our clients are from

overseas: roughly half from the [United] States and Europe, and half from Asia, with Hong Kong residents representing the largest proportion of the latter."

The Westcoast International Dental Clinic has also seen strong growth, with Hongkongers now comprising the fifth-largest group of foreign patients behind Australians, Americans, Canadians and New Zealanders.

"The number of patients we see from Hong Kong is up 50 per cent from this time last year," says clinic founder Dr Andrew Tsang.

Vietnam's first trump card is price. "In the States, you'll pay US\$600 to see a physiotherapist for one session," says Brackenbury. "Because of the practice methodology in Asia, and Vietnam especially, we can provide a considerable amount of treatment using different modalities – chiropractic, physio and so on – for less than US\$100."

Basic staff wages and the cost of running offices in Vietnam is much lower than in Bangkok, and centres pass this savings on to their clients. What's more, hospitals registered

under Vietnamese infrastructure law can import US\$15 million to US\$18 million of equipment, technology and general hospital supplies, tax-free. And because the law prohibits imports of old technology, patients can be sure that they will be treated using the most up-to-date equipment.

FV Hospital, a modern facility in Ho Chi Minh City accredited by the French National Authority for Health, recently launched a full suite of medical tourism packages, offering itineraries that combine procedures like Lasik and plastic surgery with five-star resorts and sightseeing.

"Our rates for hip replacement are about 60 per cent of the price in Thailand, and not even 40 per cent of what the surgery would cost in Singapore, yet our patients receive exactly the same quality of care," says FV's general director, Dr Jean-Marcel Guillon.

Hospitals and health care centres are staffed by both local and expatriate doctors. Most local doctors have trained overseas in their specialities, and many at international centres are *Viet kieu* –



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overseas Vietnamese – doctors who were raised in developed countries, trained abroad and usually have 10 or 20 years of international experience in their discipline. In addition some centres, such as FV, have specialists visiting all year long.

For lesser procedures, there are many other clinics. Orient Skincare and Laser Centres, for example, specialises in non-invasive cosmetic treatments, such as wrinkle reduction and botox. Much like a waxing appointment, many of these treatments can be booked around meetings or sightseeing trips, and with savings of 40 per cent to 70 per cent on prices elsewhere.

"We're on a par with large-scale dental practices in terms of quality, but with a more personalised feel," says Tsang.

His patients agree it's faster and cheaper to get an appointment and fly in for a procedure than to see someone in Hong Kong.

Paul Kember, 48, a British architect based in Hong Kong for the past 15 years, had extensive work done at Westcoast. Two root canals, four crowns, three composite filling replacements, three wisdom teeth extracted and a front bridge were replaced over two weekends a month apart. Along the way, he saw the sights with his partner. He says: "A very good company in Hong Kong quoted me HK\$100,000 for the work, whereas at Westcoast it cost just under HK\$20,000 for

comparable care and professionalism."

As appealing as it may be, Professor Raymond Liang Hin-suen, president of the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine, advises caution when going overseas for serious procedures. "I don't think there is a good source of information for patients in Hong Kong when considering overseas treatment, and the information that is available online might not be entirely reliable," he says. "Furthermore, it's stressful to seek treatment overseas, as patients don't know the place, and they don't have the much needed social support.

"Hong Kong has good medical care, and the standard is high. You should seek advice from your local doctors first."

Doctors in Vietnam say they have spent a lot of time and money implementing systems to ensure every patient can be completely confident about booking a trip.

"Our treatment co-ordinator builds a plan from scratch from conversations with the patient, usually via e-mail or Skype," says Tsang. "Our preparations are so accurate before the visit that most clients are astounded to find everything carried out exactly according to plan."

FV Hospital has an international patient officer who works via e-mail and phone to find out what they expect in terms of pricing and outcome, and ensures everything is finalised as much as possible before making appointments.

"If patients have complications immediately after the surgery, they simply extend their stay, just as they would in their home country ... and we follow their progress once they have returned home," Guillon says.

In the rare event there's a post-treatment problem, Tsang says Westcoast will cover the cost of follow-up treatment in that patient's home country.

FOLLOW THE PRESCRIPTION

Hong Kong plastic surgeon Dr Daniel Lee recommends that prospective patients:

- Go to a doctor who speaks your language and conducts a thorough Q&A. Interpreters might not understand the implications or subtleties of the information given and received.
- Find out the centre's policy on post-treatment complications.
- Ask around: inquire at the Medical Council in Hong Kong, or ask your local general practitioner whether your chosen clinic has a good reputation.
- Keep detailed notes about the consultation process and every stage of treatment.
- Take your time. If you're on a short holiday and have to make a decision on the spot, it might result in a less well-informed one.

