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Swapping shores for superior surgery

A GROWING number of people are choosing to fly thousands of miles for faster and cheaper medical treatment. Dr Jagdish Jethwa, a director at Warwickshire-based Taj Medical Group, TMG, an agency acting as an intermediary between patient and foreign hospital, explains why medical tourism has become a multi-billion pound industry. Also, how TMG's funding proposal for an online medical service has just been given the green light.

Long waiting lists in the NHS, prolonged 'stand-by' times, language barriers and not being able to get past the secretary are just some factors which can drive people to consider an alternative. For example, going abroad for treatment. In Dr Jethwa's case, an experience of these factors led him to establish TMG which its website claims is "probably the world's most experienced, independent company advising those seeking immediate, cost effective private medical treatment in India".

Dr Jethwa's experience rolls back four years when his 96-year-old grandmother, Santokben, aka Maa, broke her hip. Despite the urgency of the surgery it was eight days before the frail pensioner, who spoke little English, went under the knife. During this waiting period, Dr Jethwa wondered, "surely there must be better or faster way". He explained: "It got to the point where I was ringing private hospitals but I could not get through to any consultants, I would only get as far as the secretary who would say something like "could you bring her in a week on Tuesday".

"I even resorted to contacting hospitals in India where the response was more favourable, they could do the surgery the next day but, of course, it would have been virtually impossible to have gotten her there," he added. But having already made enquiries in India Dr Jethwa and his wife Dipsa knew that vast medical treatments there could be carried out quickly and at a fraction of the price of a private hospital here. The supply was obviously available but was there a demand?

According to TMG, for British patients considering private treatment, the cost savings are remarkable. A heart operation, such as a pacemaker replacement, may cost £20,000 in Britain; in India it can be arranged for less than £4,000, plus travel and accommodation. Knee surgery in the UK costs £20,000 privately, but may cost £8,000 in

India; a £3,000 dental package can be arranged for £600 - the faster and friendly service, a bonus of course. It's cheap because the cost of living in India is so much lower than our own. Wages are significantly less and manufacturers sell their equipment for less, but still at a profit.

TMG works only with hospitals meeting standards set by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organisations, an independent American body it aims to ensure that all clinicians are UK or US-trained and qualified, claiming to benefit from a growing tendency among NHS-trained British Indian doctors to move to the subcontinent.

Yet if something goes wrong, Dr Jethwa said, the burden falls on the patient to seek redress: "The patient's contract is with the hospital, so it's the patient's risk. We're only putting them in touch, though these are reputable hospitals." For example, TMG's affiliation with private hospitals in Mumbai, India include Wockhardt Hospital Group, DR LH Hiranandani and Hinduja hospitals. It also has links in New Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Vadodara plus several dental, cosmetic and IVF clinics in Goa, Kerala, Hyderabad and Punjab.

To date, TMG has facilitated major health surgery and dental treatment for over 500 patients, the majority of them British, American and Canadian. TMG's most recent cases include: Ten-year-old Mohsin Ali, an orphaned youngster from Pakistan who urgently needed a spinal operation. In the UK it would've cost around £40,000, TMG arranged it for £7,000, funded by Andy Lanes Foundation, an English charity; Rabin, a young man from Nepal who has a large growth on his face - being funded by ALF. TMG is also in the process of arranging a trip for a British couple residing in France. For more case studies visit www.tajmedicalgroup.co.uk.



Couple Dr Jagdish and Dipaben Jethwa, with Dr Narendra Pandya, a leading cosmetic surgeon in India.

uk or call freephone 0800 1076 360.

Asked why TMG hadn't attracted British Asians, but was slowly doing so now, Dr Jethwa explained: "In the early days we received many enquiries from Asians but very few took up our service. They were simply interested in knowing, for their medical needs, the best hospitals, best surgeons, best cause of treatment, cost, length of stay in hospital, flight costs, best hotels, pre and post surgery."

He added: "Because we provide all the above free of charge, Asians felt this was far too good to be true. They then made their own arrangements for treatment. Often the Asian patients, who although having been booked to go to our hospital, changed their minds once in India and were redirected on the advice of their Indian relatives to other lesser known, therefore cheaper hospitals/clinics. We only work with the very best, internationally-accredited hospitals which do not compete with these type of establishments." Consultants McKinsey and Co, in a report published last year, consultants McKinsey and Co, estimate that medical tourism in India is expected to become a £2 billion business by 2012.

Of the few Asians who in the past have taken up, and continue to praise TMG's service are couple Niranjana, alias Nick, and Celia Tailor, of Wembley, London. In 2004, whilst holidaying in Goa, Nick had two crowns replaced and had some extensive bridge-work done at a TMG dental surgery. Describing the service as "brilliant", Nick saved over £2,000. Since, he has regularly

visited Dr Sunil's surgery in Colva, South Goa.

MediGate - TMG's new e-service

The TMG team's ambitious plan for developing MediGate, a "self help" medical online service, is underway, thanks to an £87,000 cash injection from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) - the British government's leading funding agency for research and training in engineering and the physical sciences. MediGate will aim to give (1) anyone interested in medical treatment in India all the information they need free of charge and (2) will compliment Choose and Book, a current NHS scheme which allows patients to assess the various medical providers available to them before making their choice.

TMG has already appointed an E-Business Consultant, Seraph, an existing Chinese student from University of Warwick, to develop, over four years, MediGate as part of his Engineering doctorate. Seraph is currently working on various initiatives to generate, evaluate and implement e-business solutions for better, more efficient working. Now, TMG are seeking "a good British UK-based student, perhaps of Indian origin, who aspires to managerial positions in industry". The ideal candidate, in order to earn his or her Engineering doctorate, will combine technical research, with a UK sponsoring company, with accredited technical and business training. Also, recently TMG's call for

pharmacists in a specialist magazine resulted in over 70 pharmacists signing up. The ultimate goal of MediGate is to become a leading system, one that is hopefully adopted by the NHS across British shores.

So, what's the TMG process, should a potential patient be interested: (1) initial enquiry, usually by phone, email or letter; (2) information exchange - TMG liaises with patient's GP/hospital consultant to acquire clinical records, following patient's written permission; (3) records are scanned, encrypted and sent securely to hospital consultants in India for expert opinions; (4) provide patient with fully inclusive price (FIP), based on patient's completion of a medical assessment form; (5) TMG makes travel and visa arrangements; (6) TMG arranges hospital admission; (7) surgery and recovery, hospital discharge; (8) TMG ensures continuity of care on returning home. The FIP includes cost of a post operative check up, usually three months on arriving home with one of TMG's UK (US or Canadian) consultants.

Dr Jethwa's role pretty much covers everything. "Although we employ experts, I like to keep myself involved. I enjoy business development, marketing and promotion, patient liaison, talking with journalists."

"If need be I'll even make the tea for the girls in the office," he joked. In concluding, he said: "We are simply doing the very best we can for each and every one of our patients. We like to give them the "wow" feeling that India truly has so much to offer not just in terms of medical treatment but everything - the people, the welcome, the climate, the sites, sounds, culture, food...compared with anywhere else in the world."

So, overseas clinics are indeed becoming a fast-growing market. Not just for health conditions, but for cosmetic surgery too, with clinics from South Africa to Malaysia heavily undercutting British prices for tummy tucks, breast enlargements and facelifts. For laser eye-correction surgery, the Lexum Eye Clinic in Prague promises to undercut the UK price by up to 75 per cent. Hungarian and Polish dentists advertise guaranteed quality crowns at a third to a quarter of Western European prices. And for IVF fertility treatments at a fraction of UK prices, dozens of clinics in Eastern Europe are standing by, "next please". Their success rates are as good as, if not better than, UK clinics, and in some instances you can specify an implanted embryo's gender, a practice forbidden here.

Do you have any experiences of medical tourism to share, good or bad? Email me at dee@katwas.com



Ten year old Mohsin Ali after his spinal operation