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"The Taj Medical Group, the only Britain-based company to deal exclusively with arranging operations at premier corporate hospitals around India.

Dr Jagdish K Jethwa, CEO of the Group, said: we take care of the complete package for patients, including obtaining medical records, from their GP/hospital consultant in the UK, hospital referrals in India, admissions, passports, visas, flights, accommodation and retreats for convalescence..."

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A JEWEL IN THE

NHS waiting lists and the cost of going private have made India an attractive treatment option. By Aditi Khanna

ELLIOT Knott, a 14-year-old boy from Dorchester who could barely stand and was in constant pain after injuring his back in an ice-skating accident, is back in school after a trip to India for surgery. His family was informed by the local hospital that his wait for spinal treatment on the National Health Service (NHS) would be nine to 12 months, unless of course, his conditioned worsened.

His mother, Karen, said: "Desperate times call for desperate measures, to go private here would cost about £25,000. The same treatment in India costs around £3,000."

On returning home in December 2005, Elliot was examined by his local consultant who said, "His operation in India was conducted to a very high standard."

Long waiting lists at NHS hospitals and huge expenses involved in going private have resulted in a boom in medical tourism to India. Around 150,000 tourists from around the world are believed to have trav-

elling to India in 2004-05 – and the figure is expected to rise to 200,200 in 2006 – for medical treatment in both conventional hospitals and traditional ayurvedic centres in New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata and Hyderabad. The most common types of medical problems that are flying out of Britain include neuro, cardiac, orthopaedic and cosmetic surgery cases.

Dr Sanjay Sharma, from Escorts Heart Institute and Research Centre, a world-renowned cardiac hospital based in New Delhi, said: "Health tourists have been pouring into India since time immemorial. The only difference in the past was the focus on alternative therapies. Now India has established itself in the field of modern medicine and we are considered, if not better, then on par with the rest of the world."

His hospital works closely with the Iqbal Medical Group, the only Britain-based company to deal exclusively with arranging operations at premier corporate hospitals around India. Dr Jagdish K Jethwa, CEO of the group, said: "We take care of the complete package for such patients, including

of choosing the Indian hospitals. We work only with surgeons who have worked in different places around the world and offer that wealth of knowledge and expertise.

"The patients are guaranteed English-speaking staff right down to the nurses, clean private rooms and an international food menu. We literally hold the patients' hand all the way through the treatment. It is important that we make their stay as safe and comfortable as possible."

India's health tourism sector is expected to generate revenue of up to £1.2 billion within the next seven years, according to a 2004 study by the Confederation of Indian Industry and consultancy firm McKinsey. The Indian government has also worked up to the trend, and in view of the multiplying demand, the home ministry announced in mid-2005 that special medical visas will be made available to all foreigners seeking medical attention in recognised hospital treatment centres in India.

Under the visa scheme, people are able to stay in India for up to a year to receive treatment, with the possibility of their visit being extended if needed. The new initiative also involves accreditation of 50 hospitals and 30 ayurvedic centres across India. The list of treatments includes neuro surgery, heart operations, ophthalmic procedures, transplants and plastic surgery.

Patients from Britain are assured at least a 40 per cent saving, taking the cost of travel

and accommodation into account. A business-class flight from London to New Delhi costs around £1,400 and an orthopaedic surgery procedure would cost around £2,800-£3,500, nearly half the cost of similar surgery in this country.

Dr Ajaya Kashyap, plastic and cosmetic surgeon affiliated with Indraprastha Apollo



DESPERATE: Elliott Knott and his mother Karen

Hospital in New Delhi, said: "The cost difference, especially in cases of cosmetic surgery, which is referred to as elective surgery, is massive. In most cases, the patients are able to combine a holiday to India with a facelift or tummy tuck and even including airfare, it works out cheaper than being treated on the NHS."

The major criticism of such procedures being conducted abroad has been the lack

of a 'cooling-off period' during which the patient is given time to consider all aspects of the surgery before going under the knife. Also, in case of the surgery going wrong, authorities in Britain have no jurisdiction over these treatment facilities.

Dr Kashyap agrees: "Both these points are absolutely valid, which is why I try and make up for the cooling-off period through extensive investigation via emails and telephone calls. Every surgery does involve a risk and my only suggestion would be to pick your surgeon and hospital very carefully. There should not be any major complications if you are in capable hands."

The health scares associated with hospitals in Britain due to the Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) bug have also made India a more attractive medical destination. MRSA describe organisms that are resistant to commonly used antibiotics and, if passed on to patients, carries the risk of serious infection and in some cases, is fatal.

Dr Sanjay Sharma, whose Escorts hospital is working on creating Medcity – a new centre of medical excellence for the increasing number of medical flights to India – is quick to point out a few bottlenecks that need to be worked on. He said:

"Infrastructure at Indian airports, immigration, transport and power continue to be problem areas, but over the years, things will only change for the better."

HIGH STANDARD: Indraprastha Apollo Hospital in New Delhi

