

UK queues, cost boost India medical tourism - *By Aditi Khanna*

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London: Long waiting lists at government-run hospitals under the UK's National Health Service 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 traveled to India last year for medical treatment in both conventional hospitals and traditional ayurvedic centres. In view of the multiplying demand, the home ministry in India recently announced special medical visas for those flying in for treatment.

"We have been inundated with inquiries about treatment options in India and are at present dealing with at least five cases of surgery," says Ms Dipa Jethwa of **The Taj Medical Group, the only UK-based company** to deal exclusively with arranging operations at premier corporate hospitals across India. Offering a complete package deal of flights, accommodation and travel companion service, the group has seen a huge rise in the field over the past three years.

"Most of the people come to us following a string of problems with the NHS. We are very stringent with our criteria 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 treatment as safe and comfortable as possible," she adds.

Refusing to name the hospitals that are affiliated to the group, Ms Jethwa stresses that the choice is left up to the patient and the firm does not want to seem like it is recommending one over the other. Over the years, the Taj Medical Group has forged links with around 400 doctors and anaesthetics in New Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Baroda, Chennai, Goa and Bangalore.

The most common types of medical problems that are flying out of Britain include neuro, orthopaedic and cosmetic surgery cases. Elliot Knott, a 14-year-old who can barely stand and is in constant pain after injuring his back in an ice skating accident, is the most recent case that will be dealt with by surgeons in India.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. To go private in this country would cost about £25,000. The same treatment in India costs around £3,000," his mother Karen, who lives near Dorchester, said after she was told it would be at least 17 weeks before her son can be operated upon by the NHS.

The price difference is one of the major factors in favour of flying miles away for treatment. Taking the flights and stay into account, the patients are ensured at least a 40 per cent saving. Besides, the recent health scares associated with hospitals across Britain due to the MRSA bug make India an all the more attractive medical destination. Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus is used to describe organism that is resistant to commonly used antibiotics and, if passed on to patients, carries the risk of serious infection. It has been a major health and safety concern for the UK government, which has been battling with this problem over the past few months.

For the Indian government, the medical tourism sector is expected to generate revenue of up to £1.2 billion within the next seven years, according to a recent study by the Confederation of Indian Industry and consultancy firm McKinsey.

Under the new visa scheme, people will be able to stay in India for up to a year to receive treatment, with the possibility of extending visits via the foreign regional registration office or particular state governments. The new initiative will also entail accreditation of 50 hospitals and 30 ayurvedic centres across India for medical tourism. The health ministry will also publish a guide to Indian specialists who are prepared to treat visiting patients.

The list of treatments under the new visa scheme includes neuro surgery, heart operations, ophthalmic procedures, transplants and plastic surgery. A government statement said the medical visa would be available to all foreigners seeking medical attention in recognised hospital treatment centres in India.