

Medical Tourism

As the cost of health care skyrockets in the United States, traveling abroad to receive medical care is a more attractive option than ever.

In 2006, an estimated 150,000 Americans received health care overseas, and nearly half of the surgeries were medically necessary rather than elective, the American Medical Association says. If “wellness travel” and “alternative therapies” are included, the figure may be much higher.

With about 45 million Americans lacking health insurance and another 30 million being underinsured, U.S. medical tourism is growing at an annual rate of nearly 20 percent, according to most estimates.

Leading destinations for medical care include Costa Rica, India, Mexico and Thailand. Many common procedures in other countries cost a fraction of what they might cost in the United States. A heart bypass — including surgery and a hospital stay in a private, single-bed room — costs an average of \$100,000 in the United States, \$27,000 in Mexico and \$24,000 in Costa Rica, according to the book “Patients Beyond Borders” by Josef Woodman.

Americans, particularly those living near the U.S.-Mexico border, routinely cross to Mexico for medical care. Many have reported that their Mexican dentists and doctors tend to relate to them on a more personal level than health professionals at home.

Often, unlike hospitals in the United States, hospitals abroad are willing to provide an estimate of the cost up front, knowing that no matter what they charge, it’s still going to be cheaper than in other countries.

Many of the hospitals are certified by or members of prestigious groups such as the American Hospital Association, and the doctors have often studied or practiced in the United States.

The AMA recently issued a set of guidelines to protect patients seeking medical care in other countries, addressing financial incentives, insurance coverage and care coordination. The guidelines also call for patients to be made aware of their legal rights before travel and to have access to physician licensing and facility accreditation information.
