

Some fed-up patients choosing surgery overseas



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Some patients are getting tired of surgical wait times and are choosing to have their operations performed overseas.



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CTV.ca News Staff

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Governments across Canada say they are working to bring down wait time for various surgeries and medical procedures. Some patients are getting tired of waiting and are choosing what is a growing trend: getting their operations performed in exotic locations like India.

CTV News medical correspondent Avis Favaro followed one man, Jeff Clarke, who did just that.

Clarke, 34, lived with severe chronic back pain, likely caused by work injuries. He found no one in the Canadian health care system able or willing to ease his suffering.

"I've seen three to four surgeons over almost three years," he told Favaro. "Each time, I've waited a year to see these surgeons and once I did see them, they had nothing to offer. Nothing at all."

He decided to take action after seeing a television ad offering surgery in a matter of weeks at a hospital in India. The ad was for a company appropriately called [Surgical Tourism Canada](#), a Vancouver-based company founded in July 2005.

The company offers surgery overseas for about \$15,000, with four weeks of rehab in a five-star hotel. Prices depend on the operation performed.

Clarke remembered what his first thought was when he saw the ad: "If I don't have something happen within the next year or two, I could be in a wheelchair and there won't be anything that can be done about it. So this opportunity, I have to grab it."

So Clarke left the delays and uncertainty of Canada's health care system for the Apollo Hospital in Chennai, India. There, tests quickly showed he had two severely damaged discs.

Dr. Sajan Hegde performed surgery after he and the head orthopedic surgeon at the Apollo hospital, Dr. P. Suryanarayan, decided that surgery would be appropriate.

"We need to understand the problem, the source of the pain, and then proceed and based on the tests I think he should do very well," Suryanarayan told CTV News.

Less than a week after his surgery, Jeff was clearly feeling better.

"I feel surprisingly excellent. I was always bent over. Now I am straight," he reported.

The Canadian agency that coordinated Jeff's operation says business is booming.

"This is something that's happening. It's new to Canada but it's here for the long run," says Surgical Tourism's President Yasmeen Sayeed.

"When we started a couple of years ago, we only had the odd case here and there. Since January of 2007, we have been sending seven to eight a month and it's increasing every month," she said, adding that she recently fielded over 100 inquiry phone calls in one day.

There are plenty of other Canadians waiting for surgery on their hips, knees, and even heart who are doing exactly as Clark did, searching for quicker solutions abroad.

One woman who asked not to be named went to India for weight loss surgery after finding that the wait times for gastric bypass surgery in Canada are up to six years.

"I opted not to be on the waiting list in Canada so I did research where I could get it done on my own," she says.

But Canadian surgeons urge caution.

"There is a risk involved in surgery," notes Dr. Marc Moreau, a pediatric orthopedic specialist at the University of Alberta Children's Hospital.

"Is it the right procedure, Is it going to work? Do they know who the doctors are? Because they just get on a plane and off a plane and the doctor is there. Do they know what rules and regulations govern their practices?"

Moreau also wonders what happens if a patient develops a complication or infection when they return from

overseas. Canadian doctors may not know exactly what procedure was performed, making it more difficult to deal with unexpected problems.

"Would I advise one of my patients, or would I go or let my family members go? No," says Dr. Moreau.

But two months after his surgery, Clarke is certain it was worth taking the chance.

"I haven't been on any pain medication since a week after the surgery and I've been doped up like a horse for six years. I got more than I ever dreamed of," he says.

Clarke says he is virtually pain-free. Before his surgery, he would have described his quality of life as a one; now he says it's a 15.

"I can walk upright without anything in my hand. That's phenomenal," he says, noting he is looking forward to returning to work. "It's a whole new life at age 34. I have a second chance to do things."

With a report from CTV's medical specialist Avis Favaro and medical producer Elizabeth St. Philip

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