

Special to the Daily Courier

Foreign surgery relieves pain medicare couldn't: Penticton couple spend thousands of dollars on trip to India to get operation woman couldn't get in B.C

By Mark Brett
Wednesday, September 27, 2006



A surgical sojourn to India is literally turning out to be the vacation of a lifetime for a Penticton couple. Fed up with the frustration and delays of the Canadian medical system, Gina and Rod Littley feel they had no other choice than to go outside the country for the medical procedure Gina says she so desperately needed. While it has only been two months since the surgery to correct a degenerative spinal condition in her neck, the 69-year-old is already feeling better than she has in years. "It was totally life changing because I really could not have gone on the way I was a whole lot longer, the painkillers were just wreaking havoc on my entire body," said Gina, who had suffered from the debilitating condition for more than a decade. "While it's still too early to say hooray, hooray I'm cured, I'm feeling so much better. "The really, really disappointing thing is that I had to go halfway around the world to get help, especially when the Canada Health Act says we are

entitled to get proper health care in a timely manner."

The couple booked the month-long trip through the company, Surgical Tourism Canada, one of many firms now offering people the option of travelling to other countries for medical treatment.

The Littley's bill for the month-long trip for two to India, including the operation, hospital stay, 10 days at a five-star, beach resort and other assorted other items and services, was just over \$20,000.

Attempts to have her medical insurance cover the just the cost of surgery, \$8,000, have been rejected by the government because the procedure is available either in B.C. or elsewhere in Canada.

The Littley's have since written letters to MLA Bill Barisoff and NDP health critic Adrian Dix about the matter but have yet to hear back from either.

As well, they are part of a group-action lawsuit with several others who had out-of-country medical procedures and whose claims have also been rejected.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Health said for Medical Services Plan coverage for surgery outside of the country, pre-approval on the recommendation of a physician is necessary and the procedure cannot be available in Canada.

Initially the quote for Gina's surgery was \$9,900 however they were told later by the attending surgeon, Dr. Sajan Hegde, because the operation was not as complicated as initially thought, the fee would be reduced to \$8,000.

The doctor implanted a spacer between two of her vertebrae, used her own crushed bone spurs and inserted a titanium rod during the procedure.

"After he operated, the doctor told me he was flabbergasted that no one in B.C. would do it," said Gina.

She had initially gone to a neurosurgeon in Victoria to determine her suitability for the operation but was told the procedure would be too risky for the limited relief she would experience.

"He (doctor) said; 'oh go take some physiotherapy and if the pain gets too bad take some Tylenol,'" said Rod, who remembers that day quite vividly. "I was ready to break both his bloody knees and tell him to take a Tylenol."

The surgeon, however, did urge her to get a second opinion.

But that too was unsuccessful simply because she could find no one else to examine her.

Five Lower Mainland neurosurgeons said they were too busy giving first opinions and the sixth said he did not do necks or spines.

Gina did eventually get a favourable second opinion from a Bellingham doctor however was told because he was not registered in B.C. his diagnosis would not be considered.

"The bad part is that I could have likely had the surgery here if I could have seen one of those other surgeons," she said.

"I really feel like I've fallen between the cracks of the medical system."

It was at that point the Littleys began the search for an alternative and discovered Surgical Tourism Canada.

But travelling to India was not a decision they made overnight.

"Because this was very close to the spinal cord there was a chance I could wind up paralyzed but I actually really wasn't worried about it at all," said Gina. "We had spent two to three months checking on the doctor and talked to about six of his patients. I had a great deal of faith in this man."

She described the pre and post-operative care as much better than she would have received in Canada and hospital conditions as extremely clean.

"In conclusion, I guess what I really want to say to people is to realize that they do have choices; don't give up," said Gina.