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Need for knees in Nain

Labrador women found her own way to beat the surgery wait times

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If you're currently on the waitlist to have surgery, your quality of life is probably not what it should be. Depending on your condition, it's a problem more than 800,000 Canadian's face everyday.

Nain resident Judy Rowell took matters into her own hands.

She was facing a two-year wait list to have knee surgery because of an old sports injury.

It wasn't just one of Mrs. Rowell's knees, it was both. This meant that after getting one knee operated on, she would have to wait another two years to get the other knee replaced, because no doctor in Canada would operate on both at the same time.

After one surgery proved to be unsuccessful, she started to carefully weigh her options by researching alternatives that would help her to alleviate the excruciating pain she was feeling.

Using a British Columbia based company called Surgery Tourism Canada that out sources patients to surgeons and internationally accredited hospitals around the globe, her search led to hospitals in India.

Patients who want to have surgery, but are on

waitlist, can opt to pay for it through this company. The first step is a consultation process whereby patients send in MRIs or x-rays, or any medical reports they have. These are then sent to surgeons from various hospitals for evaluation.

When this is completed a teleconference is set up for the patient to speak to the surgeon directly, whereby they discuss various options.

If the patient and the surgeon come to an agreement they plan the surgery, and a complete package is put together for the patient, which includes everything from their visa to their airfare, to all of their hospital expenses.

A five star rehabilitation resort is also included.

When Mrs. Rowell first learned information about this company it seemed to good to be true.

"I think the philosophy and the conditions in a place like India are quite different to Canada. There is no sense that you have to get in and get out of bed as fast as possible because there is a line up waiting for the bed." – Nain resident Judy Rowell.

"I started gathering information about the services they offered, the medical situation in India, and realized that it was quite a compelling alternative," says Mrs. Rowell.

This entire process didn't take any time for Mrs. Rowell. Within an hour of emailing the company, she got a response back asking for her records. It was late February that she left for India, she had her surgery on both knees in early March and was back in Labrador at the end of the month.

"After the second day I walked out of the hospital with no crutches, no cane or nothing, just completely unassisted. It was just amazing," explains Mrs. Rowell.

She feels more Canadians need to know that this alternative is available.

"I could of hung around here and had it done for free with the Canadian system," says Mrs. Rowell.

"I would have lost years off my quality of life. By investing some money in it, I got a huge return back."

Other aspects worth mentioning include cleanliness standards of the hospital she stayed, and the over accommodating doctors and nurses, who want their patients to have the best experience possible.

"I think the philosophy and the conditions in a place like India are quite different to Canada. There is no sense that you have to get in and get out of bed as fast as possible because there is a line up waiting for the bed," explains Mrs. Rowell.

Her situation provides an interesting contrast to a report released by Wait Time Alliance for Timely Access to Health Care recently which gave the province an A grade, recognizing the progress of provincial and territorial governments in achieving wait times bench marks.

An A grade basically means that between 80 and 100 per cent of the population is treated within this national benchmark for areas of hip and knee replacement, cancer treatment, sight restoration and cardiac care.

In Mrs. Rowell's case, not only was she put on a two-year waitlist for both of her knees and having to deal with doctors that would not operate on both, she also had to travel to Nova Scotia for assessments on her injury because there are no surgeons specializing in sports related injuries in the province.

Helping waitlist patients get through the red tape is something President and CEO of Surgery Tourism Yasmeen Sayeed has been doing since July 2005. Mrs. Sayeed worked in the health care field for 23 years in Canada, the United Kingdom, Asia and the Middle East.

One of the reasons why she wanted to start her company two years ago was to provide an alternative option specifically suited for wait list patients.

When she started gathering information on how to develop a business plan for her new concept, there were 70,000 people on the wait list in British Columbia. That number has not changed.

Since 2006 Mrs. Sayeed's company has helped 60 people gain a second lease on life. 30 of these procedures were major surgeries, while the others were smaller procedures.

Some of the major operations include knee and hip replacement as well as back surgery. This year alone the company has sent 25 people, averaging five month, overseas for medical options. Judy Rowell makes just five people the company has helped from Atlantic Canada.

One of the reasons why Mrs. Sayeed thinks her company is a successful stems from her

personal connections with hospitals in India and the United Kingdom.

Her company has agreements with seven hospitals in India, one in the United Arab Emirates and two in the United States. The most recent involved a partnership with a hospital in Mexico.

All hospitals are Joint Commission International JCI accredited, which is part of the international wing of the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Hospital Organizations. This institution is located in the United States and is required to accredit every single hospital before they can operate.

Canada doesn't mandate all their hospitals to be accredited. What this means is infection rates and surgeon credentials are not checked, which provides absolutely no guideline on whether the hospital is even suitable for treating international patients.

This accreditation is something Mrs. Sayeed holds dear.

She also believes Canadians really have no other options available to them because of the stringent wait list rules in Canada.

"If someone is 45 years old, and their hip is gone, the accepted standards in Canada are to wait until they are 60 before they can get hip surgery," says Mrs. Sayeed

She adds that the reason for this is because Canadian hospitals only do hip replacements every ten years and they delay it so they don't have to do many revisions.

One of the techniques she says is available through her company is birmingham resurfacing, which is a hip surgery that has a life expectancy of thirty years or more.

The cost of Mrs. Rowell's surgery ended up costing \$24,000. That included airfare, surgery, time in hospital and meals. But the company doesn't only cater to people who have money to throw around, as Mrs. Sayeed explains.

"It is not all affluent people who come to us. We actually do get a lot of people who are on disability benefits and who are actually struggling in life," attests Mrs. Sayeed.

Since her return back to Northern Labrador, Mrs. Rowell is not wasting any time getting used to her new knees. Her work with Parks Canada keeps her on her toes walking on ice and getting in and out of helicopters.

According to her, no matter where you are in Canada waiting for surgery has become a common trend, and Nain is no different.

"Everybody up here waits, that's the problem. By the time anything gets addressed in a serious way it's too late."

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