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Making the Trek as a Medical Patient

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There are many considerations to make when evaluating a destination for specialized or discounted medical treatments that could involve, for instance, a plane to Costa Rica for a hip replacement — one that could also require a hired medical escort back.

In almost all cases, you'll need to undergo a physical exam in the United States and provide a thorough health history before traveling.

Patrick Marsek, co-founder of the first U.S.-owned and operated medical tourism agency, MedRetreat, and author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Medical Tourism," advises abiding by "the \$6,000 rule," which says that unless a procedure costs more than \$6,000, traveling makes little financial sense.

Due Diligence: Medical Tourism firms like MedRetreat and Health Travel Guides entered the scene a decade ago to facilitate those difficult decisions. While they offer accommodations at five-star resorts complete with gourmet meals and up-scale amenities, most analysts say it's essential to check the records. Hospitals accredited by The Joint Commission International (an affiliate of the United States-based Joint Commission) undergo scrutiny for quality and safety every three years. Eight hospitals in Mexico tout JCI accreditation, and they are listed on the agency's Web site: www.jointcommissioninternational.org.

It's also important to note that while The Joint Commission accredits and certifies more than 16,000 health care organizations in the United States, JCI has its own set of internationally developed standards, according to Joint Commission spokesman Ken Powers.

Several other agencies, such as the International Society for Quality in Health Care, the National Committee for Quality Assurance, the International Organization for Standardization, and the European Society for Quality in Healthcare, have implemented measures to ensure that medical tourism facilities provide high-quality care.

Establishing A Rapport: Patients seeking care outside the country will want to interview their physician ahead of time to know what to expect.

Questions to ask include:

- How long have you been practicing the procedure?
- Have you received training in the United States?
- What have the long-term health outcomes been?
- Is the staff fluent in English or is an interpreter available?

Besides receiving answers to these questions, the patient can also establish a rapport with several doctors before going under the knife.

— Heather Chambers

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