



MEDICAL TRAVEL ADVISORY

Warning

Dominican Republic

Watch List

India

Mexico

South Korea

Thailand

December 2015





MEDICAL TRAVEL WARNING: DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

MTQUA warns travelers against having any kind of medical, surgical or dental treatment in the Dominican Republic.

The Dominican Republic has an excessively large number of medical tourist deaths. This is a dangerous situation for medical travelers.

In the first six months of 2015, four medical tourists have died after having surgery in Dominican Republic clinics. In 2014, a New York resident died during surgery at a clinic in the country. Earlier reports list the deaths of three medical tourists as a result of surgery in 1998 and one in 2004 in the Dominican Republic.

On the internet, many harmed patients describe their poor outcomes and the dangerous situations they experienced in Dominican Republic clinics.

Authorities have taken some but not enough action. The government has now shut down one clinic, that of Dr. Edgar Contreras who has been the subject of three other probes by Dominican investigators over the years.

Bronx woman died seeking cheap tummy tuck surgery in Dominican Republic; her shocked family demands answers

Beverly Brignoni, 29, flew to Santo Domingo with her boyfriend, Lesley Martinez, for a tummy tuck at a reduced price. But she did not survive the procedure. A doctor told her stunned family she died of a pulmonary embolism.

BY GINGER ADAMS OTS / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS / Monday, March 31, 2014, 9:42 PM



MTQUA has been [observing events in the Dominican Republic](#) for more than a year, after American and European health authorities issued reports of serious harm to medical tourists.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported that from 2012 to 2014, 16 medical travelers returning to the United States from the Dominican Republic were diagnosed with a serious lung infection, *nontuberculous mycobacterium*.



In the same period, Swiss authorities identified five Swiss citizens who were diagnosed with similar drug resistant infections after cosmetic surgery in the Dominican Republic.

MTQUA is concerned that reports from as far back as 2003 have identified medical travelers who have acquired serious surgical-site infections after undergoing procedures in several Dominican Republic clinics. Several reports also mentioned the same Dr. Edgar Contreras who is now under investigation.

Most serious complications

Nontuberculous mycobacterium is a rapidly growing drug resistant infection, not to be treated lightly. The infection is generally associated with poor infection control practices and contaminated water. Signs of the infection may not appear for 14 days or longer, nearly always after the medical tourist has returned home. Symptoms may take up to six months to develop and include surgical wound abscesses, clear fluid drainage, pain, fever, loss of appetite, fatigue, and night sweats.



Treatment can take up to two years and sometimes require lengthy hospitalization. Because of its resistance to antibiotics, treatment often means taking several different antibiotics at the same time, which may cause severe side effects and result in physical damage or unsightly scarring.

On its website, the CDC advises all persons planning to receive surgical care outside the U.S. to verify that the health care provider and facility they are considering using are licensed and accredited by an internationally recognized accreditation organization before proceeding.

A pattern of government indifference

Since 2003, MTQUA observes little effort has been made to improve safety and quality for medical tourists in the country. The government's latest response to reports by health authorities, the media and internet blogs of the dangers to medical travelers has been to increase the promotion of the Dominican Republic as a medical destination of choice.

Until the government of the Dominican Republic makes a serious commitment to address these medical concerns that have been causing grave problems for medical tourists, MTQUA will continue to warn medical tourists against seeking treatments in the Dominican Republic.

How committed is the Dominican Republic to taking charge of this dangerous situation and cleaning up its health care environment?

MTQUA Recommends: Seek an alternative medical destination.





MEDICAL TRAVEL WATCH: INDIA

MTQUA advises medical tourists to be extremely cautious in seeking treatment in India through medical tourism facilitators or agents.

India's tourism minister has called the medical tourism industry in India “unorganized.” Industry experts tend to agree and some even describe it as chaotic.

As the medical tourism industry grows and matures in India, its weaknesses and problems are becoming clearer. At recent government-sponsored meetings in New Delhi, government and hospital officials identified lack of trust, poor quality and limited expertise in care management of medical tourists as major problems.

India's status as a preferred medical destination is increasingly threatened as more medical tourists arrive in the country and experience the lack of organized care and services both inside most hospitals and outside during the pre-surgery and aftercare periods. Governments in the Middle East and Central Asia that send sponsored medical travelers to India are finding that their medical outcomes are less than optimal.

Patient trafficking?

The medical tourism industry in India is built around hospitals paying commissions for patients to agents, doctors and foreign brokers. New Delhi hospitals pay a commission per medical traveler, a practice which some critics suggest is “patient trafficking” and is deemed unethical and even unlawful elsewhere.

New Delhi has been described as the “wild west” of Indian medical tourism and has the greatest number of direct air routes with other countries, thus taking in the most medical travelers: compare 10-12 non-stop flights from Kathmandu to Delhi daily with one to two flights a week to Bangalore, a medical center of excellence.

Bangalore hospitals – models of best practice

Elsewhere, as in Bangalore, hospitals are working hard to create order, develop appropriate care services and discourage commission-based referrals.

Bangalore is a city with excellent hospitals, surgeons and medical tourism services. Medical tourism certified hospitals in Bangalore work with medical travel facilitators on a contract basis, providing a more stable and secure care environment for medical tourists.

With the announcement that a national medical and wellness tourism board is being set up, the government may be able to create an environment conducive to tackling the “disorganization” within the Indian medical tourism industry. MTQUA will be watching on behalf of all medical tourists.





MTQUA Recommends: Seek treatment outside New Delhi if possible. Otherwise use a fee-based agency rather than one offering service for "free" and insist on a detailed written contract – before you travel there – that specifies all services that will be provided and names the providers and doctors.

In Bangalore, [Fortis Hospital Bannerghatta Road](#) and [Sagar Hospitals – DSI](#) are [Medical Tourism Certified](#) hospitals by MTQUA. Fortis is also one of the Top 10 [World's Best Hospitals for Medical Tourists™](#)





MEDICAL TRAVEL WATCH: MEXICO

MTQUA cautions medical tourists when seeking treatment in Mexican “border” towns.

The number of deaths and near deaths of medical tourists receiving medical treatment in Mexico needs to ring alarm bells throughout the medical tourism industry.



American media have reported on the deaths of several American medical tourists at one particular clinic, that of Dr. Mario Almanza in Tijuana, a border town 125 miles south of Los Angeles. Complications and infections from surgery are widespread, and have been reported widely in American media. Scripps Media reporters across the US have reported deaths and complications in medical travelers having weight loss surgery at the clinic.

“I just believed what they said. I believed everything was going to be perfect,” Colorado resident Linda Dickerson told a reporter. She traveled alone to Tijuana for gastric bypass surgery, suffered serious complications and continues to be treated at home.

Earlier this year, an Australian medical tourist died while undergoing cosmetic surgery in Mexicali, a town on the U.S. border south of Palm Springs, California.



Mexico clinics and doctors shut down

Mexican authorities quickly closed four facilities in Mexicali and 10 cosmetic surgery clinics and doctors' offices in Tijuana.



This year, authorities closed eight doctors' practices in the beach resorts of Cancun and Playa del Carmen on Mexico's east coast. Since 2012, the government has shut down more than 90 clinics and specialty cosmetic medicine centers.

A lesson for medical tourists

Mexicali and Tijuana are border towns in the state of Baja popular with American medical tourists. The Baja government appointed Dr. Jorge Tagle as director of medical tourism one year ago. "The purpose of creating this department (is to) improve every patient's experience when visiting us", said Dr. Tagle, who is head of a stem cell treatment center.

Medical tourists should be aware that government tourism offices, including medical tourism offices, exist to promote a country and bring more tourists. Health care issues important to medical tourists, like quality, safety, ethical practices, transparency of costs and outcomes are rarely part of the brief of these offices.

Mexicali and Tijuana tourism officials and convention bureau staff regularly attend medical tourism conferences in the U.S. to promote their locales as medical tourist destinations.

MTQUA Recommends: Seek care in major hospitals in cities like Monterrey which have excellent hospitals. Avoid border towns unless you are in the hands of an MTQUA Medical Tourism Certified agency such as [Ready4AChange](#) or [My Medical Vacations](#). These agencies have met international MTQUA standards for quality and safety including doctor and facility inspections, and are diligent about providing comprehensive care management and followup.





MEDICAL TRAVEL WATCH: SOUTH KOREA

MTQUA alerts medical tourists to seek treatment only in known top hospitals in South Korea where staff speak your language.

South Korea's government has announced a crackdown on illegal clinics and agents after a Chinese woman fell into a coma in January 2015 and was pronounced brain dead on the operating table while undergoing extensive plastic surgery in a Seoul clinic.

Other reports detail poor treatment, poor conditions, ghost doctors, price gouging, counterfeit drugs and injectables, and false advertising and other problems.

An online support group in China comprising hundreds of victims of alleged botched cosmetic procedures in South Korea has begun a campaign to highlight the problems, including disputes over malpractice.

Illegal agents and unlicensed doctors



“South Korea's leading plastic surgery industry is facing severe problems,” a spokesman for the Korean Association of Plastic Surgeons told Xinhua, China's official news agency.

According to Xinhua, less than 2,000 surgeons are officially registered, but more than 20,000 cosmetic surgeons are operating.

“The number of illegal intermediary medical agents is booming, mainly focusing on absorbing overseas customers through misleading promotions with high brokerage fees. Some overseas students and travel agencies act as intermediaries, getting 30%-50% from the total surgical fees,” reports the agency.

Millions spent with little results

Government bodies like the Korea Health Industry Development Institute (KHIDI), Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) and Korean International Medical Association (KIMA) have spent millions of dollars promoting and organizing the medical tourism industry, to little success.

In response to criticism of the country's medical tourism industry, the Ministry of Health and



Welfare has announced a new initiative, Medical Korea, to be an all-purpose web portal providing consultation and support for foreign patients experiencing difficulties with compensation and medical and treatment fees disputes.

KTO ambitiously forecasts that the annual number of medical tourists will rise from 399,000 in 2014 to 998,000 in 2020. Meanwhile, revenues from medical tourism are down 6.5% compared with 2013 – the first decline in medical tourism revenue since 2006, says Korea's central bank.

MTQUA asks, Why is the government so ineffective in reining in the problems? Despite the clear problems and the dissatisfaction, the country continues to spend heavily to promote medical tourism, including a new help center for the purpose of providing legal support to foreign patients unhappy with their treatment.

MTQUA Recommends: Hire a facilitator who does not work on commission, one who puts your interests above those of the medical clinic and who speaks your native language, as few Koreans speak enough English or other language to be of any help. Check out the facilitator's patient and physician references and don't depend on government-sanctioned credentials.

[Wooridul Spine Hospital](#) in Seoul is one of the Top 10 [World's Best Hospitals for Medical Tourists™](#)





MEDICAL TRAVEL WATCH: THAILAND

MTQUA urges medical tourists to be very careful when seeking a medical or surgical procedure in any clinic in Thailand.

A recent headline in *The Nation*, a leading English-language Bangkok newspaper read, Another Plastic Surgery Patient Dies.

The death of 24-year-old British woman Joy Williams in October 2014 caused barely a ripple in Bangkok. She died on the operating table during a second surgery to correct problems in her first surgery at the same clinic. Reportedly, the doctor was trying to perform the surgery and administer general anesthesia at the same time.



While Joy's death was widely publicized in the UK and around the world, in Thailand reporting on the case was driven by the foreign press.

The police shut down the clinic for a mandatory 60-day period and brought the doctor in for questioning. According to London's Channel 4 News, the doctor, Sompob Sansiri, is still seeing patients.

Infections and deaths

Thailand has its share of treatment-related severe infection cases as well. One of the most notorious is that of Australian Courtney O'Keefe who took a package tour and expected to sip cocktails by the pool after breast implant surgery. Instead, she contracted a serious bacterial infection called **pseudomonas** as a result of the surgery. It turned septic and was starting to shut down her organs. To save her life, surgeons in Australia had to perform a double mastectomy and treat her with high doses of antibiotics.

In Thailand, where medical tourism has become a huge industry and important to the country's economy, the government sometimes appears reticent to ruffle any feathers in an industry bringing in some much needed foreign currency. Instead, negative reports about Thailand's medical tourism industry seem to turn on the tourism public relations machine.



Almost overnight, after newspapers reported the death of Joy Williams, it seemed that dozens of travel blogs, press releases, and articles praising the industry started to appear.



The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) promotes “beauty journeys,” contests that promise a “totally free make-over that will change your life forever,” with winners chosen by public vote on Facebook.

Questionable at best, and certainly ill-advised, these giveaways do not follow basic rules of internet contests nor basic health care standards for privacy, safety and ethical practices.

Medical tourists should be aware that government tourism offices, including medical tourism offices, exist to promote a country and bring more tourists. Health care issues important to medical tourists, like quality, safety, ethical practices, transparency of costs and outcomes are rarely part of the brief of these offices.

MTQUA is watching for signs that government and medical bodies start to improve quality and safety in clinics that advertise to medical tourists.

MTQUA Recommends: Use only Bangkok's leading hospitals and hire a facilitator that offers care management services so you will have continuing care and monitoring while you are recovering in your hotel.

[Bumrungrad International Hospital](#) in Bangkok is one of the Top 10 [World's Best Hospitals for Medical Tourists™](#)



About this Medical Travel Advisory:

From time to time, when reliable sources in the media and health care industry report on events that present unreasonable and unwarranted harm to medical travelers and health tourists, Medical Travel Quality Alliance issues warnings to medical tourists.

MTQUA changes the advisory when a situation improves. For more information, please contact the medical director at rn@mtqua.org

MTQUA calls on the governments and medical establishments of named countries to review not only specific incidents but also the underlying reasons for these warnings in order to make medical and wellness travel safer and better for all medical tourists.



[Medical tourism certification](#) from MTQUA offers assurance to medical tourists they can expect to receive an international standard of excellence in quality of care and services from hospitals and other certified businesses.

