



feature

# TROUBLE *in* paradise?

COSMETIC SURGERY SHOULD ALWAYS BE CENTRED ON INDIVIDUAL PATIENT CARE AND NOT BE VIEWED AS PART OF A “PACKAGE DEAL”. **CAITLIN BISHOP** REPORTS.

Cosmetic surgery tourism sees several thousands of Australians venturing overseas to undergo cosmetic surgery each year. The attraction stems from affordable procedures with an accompanying holiday but these ideals of luxury can lull patients into a false sense of security.

‘The decision to have cosmetic surgery should never be taken lightly,’ says Chief Censor of the Australasian College of Cosmetic Surgery (ACCS) Dr John Flynn. ‘Considering cosmetic surgery as an “add on” to an overseas holiday is not a smart approach.’

Of late, major Australian organisations have introduced all-inclusive packages offering cosmetic surgery alongside luxury accommodation, airfares and airport transfers. But in this seductive mix of tropical getaway and surgical rejuvenation, the gravitas of cosmetic surgery is somewhat overlooked. Package deals, recommended by reputable Australian medical insurance companies, can give the illusion that cosmetic surgery can be considered as part of a bundle.

Unfortunately, the confidence patients hold in these sanctioning parties can stifle their awareness, either pushing them towards a decision or detracting from their research into other options.

‘Australians should not make a decision to undergo cosmetic surgery based solely on the advice of a travel or insurance agent or organisation,’ Dr Flynn explains. ‘Patients need to do their research, explore their options and attend consultations in person before making an informed decision.’

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The Australian authority on consumer protection, CHOICE, urges patients to carefully consider their options before deciding to undergo cosmetic surgery overseas.

‘Plenty of people seek cosmetic surgery abroad, but it’s an option that consumers need to consider with their eyes open,’ says CHOICE investigative journalist Kate

Browne. ‘Overseas procedures require planning and the onus is on the patient to do their research.’

Making an informed decision to go ahead with surgery should involve thorough consultations, with several doctors. Patients should always have the freedom to explore other options and select a doctor they feel is the best fit for their needs.

‘Patients should feel comfortable with their doctor, and this process of building trust and confidence cannot occur when the doctor is overseas,’ says Dr Flynn. ‘Once the patient is overseas, and can meet the surgeon in person, how likely are they to explore other alternatives after travelling to be there?’

Not only should patients have the means to “shop around”, each consultation should be individualised, as every body heals differently and every patient is unique in their concerns, desires and expectations. There are several factors that contribute to a patient’s suitability for surgery, and part of the consultation process involves determining if surgery is the best option for each individual’s body type, skin type and general physical and mental health.

Yet, the same way patient options are limited in seeking cosmetic surgery overseas, the autonomy of doctor discretion is also hindered. A cosmetic surgeon should feel comfortable turning patients away who are not fit for surgery, but the pressure of airfares, accommodation and package deals somewhat hampers the freedom of an individualised approach.

‘The consultation process needs to have two-way communication between the patient and the doctor,’ explains President of the ACCS Dr Soo Keat Lim. ‘The patient must convey their concerns and reasons for seeking surgery, and the doctor has to explain the process to achieving and delivering these results, according to the individual patient.’

A major issue in the cosmetic surgery tourism divide is the lack of follow-up process between the patient and overseas surgeon. If complications – either medical or aesthetic – arise, it usually falls to surgeons back in Australia to conduct the revision procedure.

Post-operative consultations are designed to monitor the results and manage complications. These consultations are conducted weeks, months and sometimes years after the surgery takes place.

‘It is not automatic that things will go wrong in cosmetic surgery tourism, but it’s not automatic that things will go right either,’ Dr Flynn says. ‘Even the most reputable doctor can have patient complications, but how can they address these if they’re located overseas?’

‘There are some complications that do not declare themselves directly after treatment,’ he adds. One

complication that does not arise until years after surgery is capsular contracture, the most common complication following breast augmentation surgery.

Capsular contracture occurs when the scar tissue surrounding the implant begins to contract, causing the implant to become distorted and hardened and often painful. Revision surgery is usually required to aesthetically restore the breast and relieve the discomfort caused by this contraction.

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In those cases where complications do arise immediately after surgery, Browne explains the patient must have money and flexibility to manage these contingencies, as cosmetic surgery is not covered by travel insurance.

‘People get into trouble when they think they’ll be in and out quickly,’ Browne says. ‘If things don’t go to plan, and the patient has to stay in hospital, extend their stay or change their flights, these expenses will not be covered by travel insurance. Travel insurance does not cover cosmetic procedures; patients need to have the money and flexibility available in case things go wrong.’

The ACCS’ position on the issue of cosmetic surgery tourism reinforces the absolute necessity of a diligent consultation and follow-up process in undergoing any form of cosmetic procedure.

Cosmetic surgery is not a commodity and should not be dressed up in five-star “care-free” travel packages. Whether overseas or at home, each patient should be confident they have made an informed decision.

‘Patients should ask themselves three questions before deciding to undergo surgery,’ says Dr Lim. ‘Do I feel comfortable with this doctor to do the procedure? Have I been given all the necessary information regarding risks and complications, follow-up procedures and expected results? And, do I feel confident that this procedure is right for me?’

Patient research, consultation and aftercare are essential components to successful surgery. Ultimately, each patient should be treated as an individual, and not as part of a “package deal”. **csbm**