

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Vacation Dentistry: Proceed with Caution

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By Dr. Eric Schoenebeck

Despite mounds of clinical research proving that dental implants are far superior to dentures as a tooth replacement option, most dental insurances still don't cover the cost of dental implants, labeling the procedure as "cosmetic." With Covid-19 restrictions lifting or at least decreasing in many other countries, we're guessing some individuals may be tempted to fly abroad to obtain what first appears to be cheaper dental implants. Covid-19 concerns notwithstanding, is vacation dentistry (also known as dental tourism) ever a

good idea?

What's Cheap is Dear

“The lower price was incredible,” said one New Jersey lawyer who prefers to remain anonymous, about the bargain-rate dental implant quote he obtained from a Costa Rica dentist in 2017. The lawyer had been planning a trip to Costa Rica anyway, so it seemed prudent to have much-needed dental implants placed while there.

He would soon live to regret his decision. When the lawyer arrived at the address provided for a 9 a.m. appointment, he found himself in a crowded room with about 30 other patients also waiting to be seen.

“I soon realized this was pretty much a factory,” he says. He discovered that the other patients had been given the same 9 a.m. appointment time. In addition, he commented, “There was no attempt to explain the process or even talk to me.”

Within two years, all his implants (both upper and lower arches) had failed. The patient was devastated. According to the U.S. periodontist who ultimately had to restore the patient's implants, the implants had been too small, too close together, and there hadn't been sufficient bone to support them.

Questions to ask yourself and the offshore dental implant surgeon if you are considering dental tourism:

Transparency: Can you thoroughly research your prospective dental professional? Will this trip allow time for an initial consultation where your doctor performs an examination, reviews your **dental and overall health**, and answers all your questions?

Material Quality: What's the quality of the material that will be used? A global market of hundreds of implant material manufacturers means that a cheap overseas quote could be based on poorer quality material. Only top-quality components (in the right hands) ensure proper fit and biocompatibility.

Hygiene: What kind of Covid-19 protocols are they following? What sort of environment will you face when you reach your destination? Clinical standards may not be the same. Could you be at greater risk for infection of all kinds?

Recommendations: Can you trust vague online reviews when that's all you have as a source of information? More than likely, a U.S. periodontist will also be recommended by a friend, relative, or your regular dentist.

Credentials: Do you understand that educational levels and practice philosophies can vary by country? There's a big difference between being able to perform a procedure and

being able to perform it masterfully.

Safety: Traveling to your local periodontist versus driving through a foreign city can be a nightmare. And, in terms of the efficiency of the procedure itself, is the practitioner rushing critical steps in order to **fit** too much in during your stay?

Language Barriers: Do you speak the language of the country you're visiting? Do the doctor and dental team speak English? Errors in communication or translation could result in discomfort and even health issues.

Follow-up Care: Medical issues can arise even after the best surgery. Do you want to be able to call an emergency number and be seen immediately by your trusted local surgeon, or do you want to have to search around for a specialist? Follow-up appointments in practices like ours are normally not considered optional; they are a mandatory part of the process.

Complications: Problems can arise, such as the loosening of an implant, issues with bone structure, or infection. Do your hotel budget and flight ticket allow for an extended stay to tackle an issue? Also, keep in mind that flying too soon after any surgery can increase the risk of blood clots.

Guarantee: Most U.S. implant doctors are board-certified surgeons who guarantee their work. What kind of guarantee can you obtain abroad? Some of the overseas centers promise "lifetime guarantees" but, if this is even true, will you want to hop on a plane when you discover that your implants are loose?

Long-Term Considerations

There's no doubt that dental implants are the best long-term option to replace lost or failing teeth. If price is your main obstacle, consider that many practices are happy to work with you if you can't afford to pay for the process upfront. Many practices offer phased treatment over a more gradual period if possible, as well as no or low-interest payment plans you can make over time with healthcare financing companies like **CareCredit®** and **Lending Club Patient Solutions**.

Doing nothing about failing or missing teeth has its own pitfalls. But we urge patients to proceed with caution before making a rash decision that can dramatically affect their appearance and overall health. In the end, the allure of a "vacation" and less expensive dental costs may not be enough to make up for the real price you pay for procedures gone wrong.

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