

Paradise botched

Travelling to the tropics for a cheap boob job and cocktails by the pool might sound like the perfect holiday to some, but for a growing number of Kiwi women the reality is more nightmare than dream break BY KATH PORTER

Imagine as a teen being teased by your fellow classmates because of your 'small boobs'. It's then that you decide, in the future, when you can afford it, you will undergo cosmetic surgery. However, what if you don't get it done in New Zealand but overseas for a cheaper price? And what if that much-wanted surgery goes horribly wrong? Enter the world of medical tourism, where thousands of New Zealand women are being lured to South-East Asia each year by cheap cosmetic surgery deals. Kiwi woman Jessica*, who travelled to Thailand six months ago on a cosmetic surgery package holiday in a bid to get the perfect pair of breasts, is one of those women.

THE PRICE OF BEAUTY

"I found out a family friend had booked to get her boobs done, so I decided it was a good opportunity," she explains. "The price was attractive - it's almost \$10,000 cheaper to get them done over there, and I was also looking forward to visiting another country."

However, what was to be Jessica's first overseas trip instead quickly turned into a nightmare from which she is only just recovering.

And she's not alone. Studies show a boom in medical tourism over the past few years - there were 10 million medical tourists worldwide in 2014 and the lucrative industry is now worth more than \$50 billion.

Kiwis are travelling overseas for all sorts of medical treatments because it is much cheaper than having the surgery here in New Zealand.

According to Dr Sally Langley, president of the New Zealand Association of Plastic Surgeons (NZAPS), the reason more and more Kiwi women are attracted to cosmetic surgery package holidays is because of the price. "As far as we know, this is all related to cost. Using well-trained surgeons, anaesthetists and accredited hospitals here is more expensive," says Langley. "Also the advertising promotes the procedures with a holiday in a tropical resort location."

However, not all trips are alike. International manager for cosmetic surgery holiday company Gorgeous Getaways, Paula Vernon is based in New Zealand, has had surgeries herself in Malaysia and says it's important for women to do as much research as possible.

"We've been sending people to Malaysia for 11 years and we have a ground crew of 12-15 people there, including specific nurses for post-surgery care," she says. "But today there are so many agents that you can feel overwhelmed, so that's why I always advise people to look up the history and do your homework."

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But what may end up for some being a case of palm trees, pina colodas and the ultimate plastic fantastic experience, isn't the case for all. Indeed, for our subjects their stories are so sensitive that their names have been changed to protect their identities - but all are speaking out because they want other Kiwi women to understand that there is a much darker side to the medical tourism industry, one that can drain you financially, physically and emotionally.

D-CUP DISASTER

Jessica is sitting on her couch, sore and swollen but finally sporting a pair of breasts that, thankfully, are both the same size and shape. Six months ago, the then 20-year-old went on a plastic surgery holiday to Thailand that left her scarred, sick and in complete agony.

When the cosmetic surgery she received at a Bangkok hospital went terribly wrong, the office worker returned to New Zealand with only one of her two brand-new implants remaining and contracted such a terrible infection that she's only just been strong enough to undergo corrective surgery at a South Island hospital.

The whole ordeal has been a physical and emotional roller coaster - not to mention a massive financial undertaking she had to use her savings to pay for. And she wants to warn other Kiwi women who may be considering taking the same option as her to weigh up the real risks.

It took Jessica just three weeks to make the decision to join her friend on a trip to Thailand to undergo surgery because the price of \$4500 - excluding flights and accommodation - seemed like a cheap way to get the breast implant surgery she'd always wanted.

She had originally been an A cup but wanted the operation to take her up to a D cup.

"Because I decided quickly, I didn't have time to get a quote in New Zealand before I left, but apparently it would cost between \$12,000 and >>

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DEALING WITH THE DEMONS

Threatening the hospital with lawyers, Jessica received a full refund for her operation, and her partner back home in New Zealand booked her the first possible flight out of Bangkok.

“On the plane home, I was so sick because they hadn’t worked out what was causing the infection,” she says. “After our treatment, my friend and I were given Diazepam [a prescription drug usually used to treat anxiety symptoms and alcohol withdrawal] and told they were sleeping pills, so I took a couple of those to knock myself out.”

The day after she arrived back in New Zealand, Jessica was admitted to hospital and the doctors diagnosed her infection as a gut bacteria. She stayed in a ward for five days to bring the infection under control and drain any remaining fluid.

“I remember in Thailand, just before I had the first surgery, I wasn’t able to wash my hands properly. I asked my New Zealand surgeon if that could have caused the infection because, at the time, I was worried about it. But he said the type of infection it was couldn’t have been a result of that – it could have only come out of someone’s gut,” she says.

“The only thing I can put it down to is unclean instruments. I know for a fact that the person that had surgery before me in Thailand had a tummy tuck and then I was next in the room for surgery.”

Working with her Kiwi GP, Jessica found a private plastic surgeon who could give her the breasts she originally travelled to Thailand for, and now she has the results she wanted.

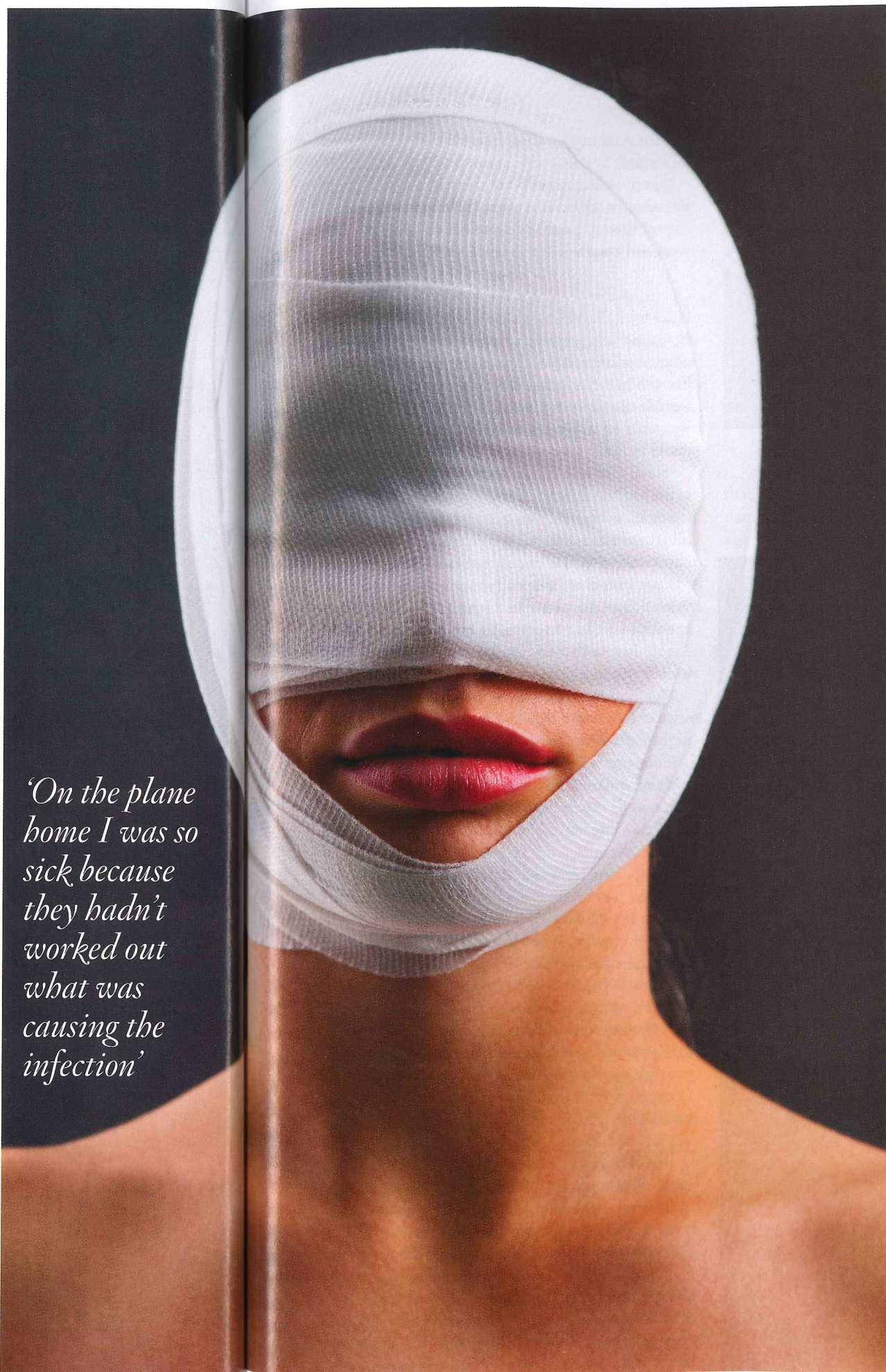
“I now know that I’m strong and I can go through something like this alone and be okay. When it was happening, I was an absolute crying mess and I had a lot of demons to deal with afterwards. But now that everything’s done, I just feel like it’s prepared me for anything bad that could happen to me in the future.”

BEST-LAID PLANS

Like Jessica, Fiona* had also dreamed of bigger breasts. She was just 19 when she travelled to Malaysia for her augmentation. Sensible and organised, the teenager spent months researching treatments and found a tour operator, who was able to answer all of her questions and provided lots of detail about the surgeon and the hospital.

“I was fed all the right information and was in discussion for quite some time before I went,” she explains. “There are many things that they do right and people do end up getting good procedures but

‘On the plane home I was so sick because they hadn’t worked out what was causing the infection’



I was one of the unlucky ones.”

From the moment she arrived at the hospital, Fiona recalls her unease. She has a small frame and as an AA was “pretty flat-chested” and only wanted to go up to a B cup – just two sizes bigger than her natural breasts.

“I had an idea of the size of implants I wanted. But I only had a short consultation of 10 minutes with the surgeon and he decided he wanted me to have bigger breasts. He said the bigger implants would be better for certain reasons – the most important of which seemed to be that he didn’t want me to be disappointed. I felt pressured. I was young and, to be honest, I’ve tried to blank all of it out of my memory because what took place afterwards ended up being so traumatic.” After her operation, Fiona awoke >>

Things to consider

- **It’s major surgery** so don’t expect to be swanning around the pool or heading off to an island for snorkelling a few days later. It may be in an idyllic location but this is not your average holiday.

- **You may not be insured** if you choose to undergo surgery overseas and it goes wrong. ACC does not automatically cover your care back home in New Zealand.

- **The price difference** between here and Thailand for breast augmentation is about \$10,000 – approximately \$6000 in Thailand compared with \$15,000-\$17,000 for Auckland’s top plastic surgeons. But don’t forget to factor in travel and accommodation expenses.

- **The physical ramifications** are not to be underestimated, so do your research into the surgeons the tour company is using.

- **Have a back-up plan** and an emergency contact in case something goes wrong.

- **Consult a New Zealand surgeon** before you leave (appointments usually cost about \$300) so they can give you an idea of what to expect from the surgery.

- **Use a reputable operator.** How can you tell? Do your research!

to implants that felt swollen and oversized.

"He created a 'uni-boob,'" she explains. "The implants were so big for my frame I was left with no chest wall. The surgeon over-cut all the muscles away from my ribcage and I ended up with one pocket for two boobs but, because of the fact they were so big, you couldn't really tell and they just looked like one mass."

During a follow-up appointment, the Auckland teen raised the problem with the Malaysian hospital.

"I mentioned the shape of my implants and the fact they blended into one but I was told it was just swelling. I believed everything they said because it's such a massive surgery and it does take months to heal."

However, when she returned to New Zealand, what she thought was just swelling never abated. Instead, Fiona was left with a giant 'uni-breast',

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meaning there was absolutely no definition across her chest.

"I kept telling myself that the swelling was going to reduce and I would start looking normal soon. Then I tried to convince myself it was just how they were and began doing research on the internet."

COSTLY MISTAKES

It wasn't until a year after the surgery that the countless hours spent searching cyberspace gave her the self-diagnosis she was looking for. Yet it would take a further six years of saving before Fiona was able to afford to have the medical mistakes made in Malaysia corrected in New Zealand.

"Having plastic surgery go wrong like this is one of the hardest things to correct and I'm not at all sure it's fixed, even now," she admits, quietly. "I've been told the chances of having my chest stick back to my chest wall are very slim and that's a weird feeling, not to have your chest stuck to your chest wall."

While the initial implants cost \$6000, Fiona has spent nearly \$18,000 correcting the mistakes. Today, she no longer has any implants and says her chest is back to being flat, like it was before the surgery.

"I've had my implants removed but I didn't put any back in again because I just wanted the whole nightmare to be over," she says.

Fiona urges Kiwi women to be as cautious as they can and understand all the risks and ramifications that come with opting for major cosmetic surgery, such as a breast augmentation, whether at home or overseas.

"If I had my time again, I wouldn't have done it," she says. "I know people whose lives it has changed for the better. But it's had the complete opposite effect on my life. If you are thinking about having cosmetic surgery, think about it for two years. And if you are going to go overseas, consult a Kiwi surgeon before you leave, because it will be the best \$300-\$500 you've ever spent."

"Having surgery like this doesn't just change your physical appearance. This is something that impacts on your whole life - physically, mentally and financially - so do your research."

THE HONEYMOON'S OVER

Like Fiona and Jessica, Kelly* had always harboured a desire to surgically alter a part of her body she'd never been comfortable with.

The labia of her vagina were larger than normal and it made her self-conscious and caused personal discomfort.

When she and her partner booked a tropical honeymoon in Thailand, Kelly decided she would investigate the cost of getting a labiaplasty to

reduce the inner lips of the vagina while she was there. She had heard the procedure was safe, cheap and reliable.

Rather than book with a plastic surgery tour operator, Kelly did her own groundwork instead, emailing hospitals and asking questions for a year before committing to treatment.

"I always knew having a labiaplasty was something I wanted but it was sort of an after-thought once we'd committed to our holiday," she says. "I researched everything from the kind of procedure I wanted, to the doctor I thought would be best to use because he had pretty good feedback. It wasn't an irrational decision. It was well-thought out, or so I believed."

DREAMS UNRAVELLED

The fact the surgery was \$3000 cheaper in Thailand than in New Zealand was a major incentive to Kelly, who used her savings to pay for it. "I didn't want to spend the amount of money it would have cost in New Zealand [approximately \$5000]. But, in hindsight, it's cost me far more."

Kelly opted to have the surgery at the very end of her honeymoon, two days before she flew home. "He was the only doctor who agreed to do that," she explains. "I thought it was such a straightforward procedure it would be okay to come home immediately."

However, 10 days after the procedure and back home in New Zealand, Kelly discovered something had gone very wrong. "I looked down and realised my stitching was coming undone," she says.

Auckland plastic surgeon Dr Tristan de Chalain remembers the moment Kelly arrived "in a flat panic" in his office.

"I could see the patient had had a labiaplasty, and there are different techniques for doing this operation, but the Thai surgeon had used a technique I had never come across before and it looked like he'd stitched it in a hurry," he explains. "The Thai surgeon had stitched only the outer and inner layers and with running sutures. What this meant was when the stitch broke or gave way, the whole repair fell apart."

While Kelly wasn't in any pain, de Chalain was deeply concerned by the standard of care she had received. "He explained to me the way they had cut me was very different and, basically, the surgery was never going to last permanently."

The New Zealand surgeon also found some necrotic (dead) tissue that was caused by marginal to poor blood supply to the labia.

"This is the second girl I've seen from Thailand with the same problem," says de Chalain, "as well as problems with rhinoplasty [nose job], a face lift and marginal aesthetic results from an abdominoplasty."



Kelly underwent a corrective surgical procedure that same day, in which de Chalain repaired her damaged labia. She was sent home on antibiotics and told to avoid sex for two months.

VOLUME DEALERS

This kind of botched overseas surgery makes de Chalain irate and he urges Kiwi women to understand the true implications of getting a 'cheap deal'.

"You don't know who you're getting as a surgeon. He may be brilliant or he may be a dud," he advises. "Understand you are part of a factory process. These places are volume dealers - patients are not treated as individuals with very different needs, desires and expectations."

"By the time Kelly arrived for surgery, she was likely their third labiaplasty on the morning list. My rhinoplasty patient was most upset the surgeon didn't even want to look at the pictures she'd brought along illustrating what she wanted. Instead he told her, 'You've paid for a basic rhinoplasty - a hump reduction and tip shortening - that's what we'll do.'"

IT'S NO VACATION

He also cautions against such surgeries because drug regulatory policies internationally are far different from New Zealand, as are surgical and hospital standards.

"Sure, the brochures show pictures of beautiful beaches and offer you two weeks' holiday. However, if you have just had an abdominoplasty or a facelift, believe me, you won't want to be lounging on the sand."

Kelly learnt her lesson the hard way. "Physically I'm healed but it's been an emotional battle for me. As someone who suffers with anxiety already, I have lost a lot of weight because of the stress and I was distraught with myself because I put myself through all this unnecessary pain." □

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Have you had botched surgery overseas?

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