

OVERSEAS PLASTIC SURGERY/MEDICAL TOURISM

Position

The New Zealand Association of Plastic Surgeons believes travelling overseas for plastic surgery is not worth the risk.

Background

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of New Zealanders travelling overseas for lower cost plastic surgery either through specialist medical tourism companies or as individuals.

The Association is concerned there are numerous risks to patients from this type of overseas surgery, including:

- a short, initial consultation period, with surgery often booked for the day after the consultation
- unregistered and untrained medical staff
- lack of follow-up, with patients often travelling back to New Zealand soon after surgery
- blood clots as a result of long haul travel too soon before and after surgery
- use of unregulated implants
- post-surgery multi-resistant organism infection
- lack of medical or legal solutions for patients who experience complications.

Overseas, plastic surgery might not be done as well as it should be and patients may not receive the correct standard of care, including post-operative care. If there are complications, any initial cost saving quickly disappears.

It is safer for people to pay a bit more to have plastic surgery in New Zealand by using registered and highly trained plastic surgeons, anaesthetists and nursing staff, working in an accredited hospital. If there are complications, the same surgeon and other suitable medical professionals will be there to look after the patient.

Lower consultation, operating and registration standards

Overseas, short, initial consultations quickly followed by surgery are of particular concern to the Association. This can lead to the surgeon not adequately assessing the patient and the patient having to make a quick decision about their surgery. While there may have been discussion via email or videoconference between the patient and the overseas surgeon, this is no substitute for taking a proper medical history and clinical examination.

The Medical Council of New Zealand recommends a seven day stand-down period between first consultation and cosmetic surgery and the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons recommends a 10-day minimum.

Plastic surgeons in some countries may not be trained surgeons or even trained doctors.

Breast implant surgery overseas carries the risk of unregulated implants being used. Since 2004 suppliers of medical devices in New Zealand, including breast implants, must notify details of their devices to the *Web Assisted Notification of Devices* database maintained by The New Zealand Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Authority (Medsafe).

Complications of long haul travel

Cosmetic surgery destinations tend to be a long way from New Zealand with flights taking more than eight hours, which carries an increased risk of blood clots, which can be life-threatening.

Performing major surgery on patients within one month of long haul travel increases the risk of post-operative blood clots. Long haul travel within one month of surgery is also categorised as high risk.

Major surgery is also a high risk for subsequent blood clots. Commonly performed cosmetic surgery procedures such as body liposuction, abdominoplasty (tummy tuck) and breast surgery are classed as major operations.

The New Zealand Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Authority (Medsafe) recommends medical practitioners “discuss with travellers the possibility of avoiding or delaying travel” within six weeks of major surgery because of the risk of blood clots.

Post-operative care is vital to recovery from surgery and a qualified and accredited surgeon should offer their patients a high level of post-operative care. This should not be combined with a holiday.

Infection risk and post-operative complications

Both complications and unsatisfactory outcomes may occur following cosmetic surgery. If a complication occurs, patients usually have to come back to New Zealand for treatment. The Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) may cover patients for treatment injury.

Patients who undergo surgery in countries where multi-resistant organisms are present are at risk of post-surgery infection with these organisms, which also pose a biosecurity risk to New Zealand.

There are currently limited options for patients to seek medical censure or sue a doctor for substandard care provided overseas. New Zealand companies facilitating the treatment are also unable to be challenged for their role in a situation where a patient is injured.

The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) is working to address some of these concerns through communication between surgeons here and those in countries popular with New Zealand plastic surgery patients. Much of the discussion has been about post-operative care and the responsibilities surgeons have to be contactable and provide adequate notes on the procedure performed.

The Association recommends that New Zealanders considering having cosmetic surgery overseas seek out a qualified plastic surgeon to carry out the procedure. Most countries have plastic surgery societies with affiliations to other creditable organisations such as the ISAPS or the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

The Association also recommends New Zealanders ask the following questions:

- Is my surgeon a member of the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS)? This means they have some form of internationally recognised qualification.
- Do I have the right information and have I had enough time to give informed consent?
- Have the risks and complications been explained to me?
- Has there been at least a week between appointments so I have had adequate time to consider surgery and make an informed decision?
- Are the medical standards of care and quality control requirements at least as good as those in New Zealand?
- Have I been assured that the devices and products used in overseas hospitals meet New Zealand standards?
- Do I have a plan in the case of post-operative problems?
- Will I actually see the surgeon, or is the initial 'free' visit with a nurse or administration person?
- Will I get full, written financial details, including all out of pocket expenses for not only the surgeon, but also the anaesthetist, assistant and hospital theatre or facility costs?
- Have I been told about post-operative care and what to do if complications arise after the surgery?
- What will happen if things go wrong? Will my surgeon accept liability?
- Where will I be financially if things go wrong, what other costs do I need to consider?

More information about plastic surgery is available on the [New Zealand Association of Plastic Surgeons website](http://www.plasticsurgery.org.nz). www.plasticsurgery.org.nz