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Plastic Surgery Briefing: Cosmetic Surgery Tourism

Cosmetic surgery tourism is a price-driven phenomenon that has experienced increased growth over the past decade. Numerous companies offering all-inclusive vacation packages that include cosmetic surgery are popping up all over the world and can be easily located via the Internet. The offers generally include private hospital services and tout “highly trained” and “credentialed” medical staff. Since elective cosmetic surgery procedures are not covered by insurance, price is the major selling point of cosmetic surgery tourism, with entire vacation/surgical packages costing less than individual procedures in the United States.

Although there are many skilled and qualified physicians practicing all over world, the ASPS cautions that it may be difficult to assess the training and credentials of surgeons outside of the United States. Patients may take unnecessary risks, when choosing cosmetic surgery vacations, by unknowingly selecting unqualified physicians and having procedures performed in non-accredited surgical facilities. The ASPS urges patients to consider the potential complications, unsatisfactory results, and risks to general health that may occur.

Vacation-related activities may comprise patients’ health. Cosmetic surgery trips are marketed as vacations. Although enticing, vacation activities should be avoided after surgery. To properly heal and to reduce the possibility of complications, patients should not sunbath, drink alcohol, swim/snorkel, water ski/jet ski, parasail, take extensive tours (walking or bus), or exercise after surgery.

Cosmetic surgery is real surgery. At the highest level of care, every surgery, including cosmetic surgery, has some risks. These risks may increase when procedures are performed during cosmetic surgery vacations. Infections are the most common complication seen in patients that go abroad for cosmetic surgery. Other complications include unsightly scars, hematomas, and unsatisfactory results.

Travel combined with surgery significantly increases risk of complications. Individually, long flights or surgery can increase the potential risk of developing pulmonary embolism and blood clots. Traveling combined with surgery further increase the risk of developing these potentially fatal complications, in addition to, swelling and infection. Before flying, the ASPS suggests waiting five to seven days after body procedures such as liposuction and breast augmentation and seven to 10 days after cosmetic procedures of the face including facelifts, eyelid surgery, nose jobs, and laser treatments.

Follow-up care and monitoring may be limited. Follow-up care and monitoring is an important part of any surgery. Cosmetic surgery vacation packages provide limited follow-up care, if any, once the patient returns to the United States. Patients who have traveled outside of the United States for cosmetic surgery and experienced a complication may find it hard to locate a qualified plastic surgeon to treat the problem or to provide revision surgeries. Local doctors may not know what surgical

techniques the physician used in the initial operation, making treatment difficult or nearly impossible. Revision surgeries can be more complicated than the initial operation and patients rarely get the desired results.

Bargain surgery can be costly. Patients can incur additional costs for revision surgeries and complications that may total more than the cost of the initial operation if originally performed in the United States.

Surgeon and facility qualifications may not be verifiable. In order for cosmetic surgery to be performed safely, it requires the proper administration of anesthesia, sterile technique, modern instrumentation and equipment, as well as, properly trained surgeons. Vacation destinations may not have formal medical accreditation boards to certify physicians or medical facilities. Many facilities are privately owned and operated, making it difficult to check the credentials of surgeons, anesthesiologists and other medical personnel. There are no U.S. laws that protect patients or mandate the training and qualifications of physicians who perform plastic surgery outside of the United States. There may be no legal recourse if surgical negligence by the physician or institution occurs.

Devices and products used may not meet U.S. standards. Cosmetic surgery products or devices used in other countries may not have been tested, proven safe and effective, or been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). For example, an implant used in the United States must meet standards of safety and effectiveness, a process regulated by the FDA. Other countries may not have similar regulations.

Common Cosmetic Surgery Tourism Destinations, Requested Procedures, and Patient Profile:

Popular destinations for cosmetic surgery tourism include: Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, Philippines, Poland, South Africa, and Thailand. These destinations offer everything from “safari and surgery” to “tropical, scenic tour” vacation packages.

Although statistics are not available on the number of patients who have taken cosmetic surgery vacations - the majority of patients do not solely seek minimally-invasive procedures. Common procedures requested include breast augmentation, liposuction, facelift, tummy tucks, eyelid surgery, and nose reshaping. With the introduction of reality plastic surgery shows, some companies are now offering “extreme makeovers.”

According to ASPS statistics, women made up 88 percent of all cosmetic surgery patients in the United States in 2004, with the majority being age 35-50. Patients who opt for cosmetic surgery vacations usually mirror this demographic.

Cosmetic Surgery Patient Safety Check List:

To help ensure optimal results and to limit risks and complications, the ASPS offers the following tips to anyone considering cosmetic surgery in the United States.

- **Do Your Homework:** Research the procedure, the benefits, and the risks. Refer to www.plastic surgery.org for the latest information on plastic surgery procedures.
- **Have Realistic Expectations:** Ask your plastic surgeon questions about how the surgery will work for you: identify expectations and understand side effects and recovery time.
- **Be Informed:** Talk to patients who have had your procedure so you know what to expect.

- **Require a Medical Evaluation:** Consult with your plastic surgeon for an evaluation and discuss your full medical history to determine the most appropriate treatment.
- **Choose an ASPS Member Surgeon:** Why? ASPS Member Surgeons are qualified, trained, properly certified, experienced in your procedure, and only operate in accredited facilities.
- **Ask Questions:**
 1. Are you an ASPS Member Surgeon?
 2. Are you certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery?
 3. Do you have hospital privileges to perform this procedure? If so, at which hospitals?
 4. How many procedures of this type have you performed?
 5. Am I a good candidate for this procedure? What will be expected of me to get optimal results?
 6. Where and how will you perform my procedure?
 7. Is the surgical facility accredited?
 8. What are the risks involved with my procedure?
 9. How long of a recovery period can I expect, and what kind of help will I need during my recovery?
 10. Will I need to take time off work? If so, how long?
 11. How much will my procedure cost? Are financing options available?
 12. How are complications handled?

For referrals to ASPS Member Surgeons, call the ASPS at 888-4-PLASTIC (888-475-2784) or visit www.plasticsurgery.org. Additionally, **consumers seriously considering traveling abroad for cosmetic surgery** can go to www.plasticsurgery.org for referrals to international ASPS Member Surgeons.

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The American Society of Plastic Surgeons is the largest organization of board-certified plastic surgeons in the world. With more than 5,000 members, the society is recognized as a leading authority and information source on cosmetic and reconstructive plastic surgery. ASPS comprises 94 percent of all board-certified plastic surgeons in the United States. Founded in 1931, the society represents physicians certified by The American Board of Plastic Surgery or The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

This document is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information on the topic covered as of the date of publication and is subject to change as scientific knowledge, technology advances and practice patterns evolve. The views expressed represent the collective, but not necessarily the individual, views of members of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.