In Praise Of Mexican Surgery

Howard Huntington, AP

“Life was not looking like it was worth living anymore. I couldn't see any way out. Then this came up. I jumped on it immediately. I didn't care if it was Kookamunga.”

Jim Krois had been a photographer for the *Daily Courier* for five years when he was laid off in 2008. He couldn't afford the $875 it would have cost per month to stay on the company's health insurance plan. And 60-year-old Krois had a failing hip. With no cartilage to speak of, it was bone-on-bone. The pain turned him into a Third World medical tourist, risky in the opinion of professionals he no longer believes.

He says he didn't qualify for government help, and couldn't afford on his own to see a specialist about his hip. His family doctor supplied painkillers, but they “just kept me from screaming. It was worse and worse and I actually got really depressed. I thought I was going to end up in a wheelchair.”

Krois really was in a wheelchair when he finally got on a plane. His doctor had connected him with a man who had hip-replacement surgery in Mexico. “He couldn't say enough about how good they were, and how clean everything was.” Krois still had doubts, but few alternatives. “I looked at Singapore and India and Costa Rica,” he says. “India was cheap. It was only $7,000.”

Mexico was $12,000 — still far less than the $52,000 to $80,000 Krois says he had been quoted for surgery in the United States — and closer than the other countries. His sister, Madeleine, gave him the money and asked for only half back.

Dr. Max Greig, who is listed on the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons website as an international affiliate, performed the surgery. Hours later, Krois was already starting to get back on his feet. He had a private room, and the food was great. “Anything you wanted, they got,” he says. “Everything was top-of-the-line. They had doctors come to the hotel (after discharge), change the dressings, check it out, ask me if I needed anything.”

With the exception of his family doctor back home — who didn't want to be named and declined to comment, even anonymously — Krois emerged even more critical of American medicine. “I was really happy with my health care until I needed this major stuff and had to deal with institutions like hospitals,” he stated.

He says the surgery added back half an inch to his leg, and he's well enough now to consider going back to painting houses. If he needs surgery again, will it be in Mexico? “Absolutely,” although Krois thinks he will qualify for help under President Obama's health care reforms.

People need to compare regulation of health care in foreign countries, cautions Matt Fenwick, spokesman for the American Hospital Association. “The U.S. still has the gold standard. What you have at U.S. hospitals are any number of protections and assurances, in terms of quality of care, in terms of safe care. The clinicians, caregivers, etc., are well trained and entrenched in the community,” Fenwick says.

Fenwick points out that domestic hospitals can deal quicker with any complications from surgery. They're also more convenient for family and friends of the patient, and don't require adjustment to a foreign culture.

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