

Health care in Asia

Making babies | What Asia has to offer

Specialized fertility centers offer advanced techniques

This July marked the 30th anniversary of the world's first baby born through in vitro fertilization — Louise Brown, born in 1978 in the town of Oldham, England. Since then, there have been nearly 3.5 million "test-tube babies" born worldwide.

Brown's birth marked a major milestone in fertility treatments. But couples requiring help conceiving children know how costly and time-consuming the treatment can be, especially in North America and Europe. Rising costs, lengthy wait times, limited insurance coverage and denial of services because of age or other factors prevent many couples from conceiving.

Many Asian nations now offer a cost-effective and high-tech alternative. TMC Fertility Center in Malaysia is typical of what Asia has to offer. The country's largest fertility center in terms of patient base, TMC combines medical expertise and state-of-the-art technology to maximize each couple's chances of realizing their dream of having their own children.

Together with its high pregnancy rates, TMC Fertility Center considers itself the best value for money in the region in terms of cost per baby. The center says its rates for in vitro fertilization procedures are 20 percent to 50 percent lower than those at similar facilities in Singapore.

When choosing a fertility center, prospective patients should look closely at suc-

cess rates because data can be collected and interpreted in many different ways. TMC suggests that couples obtain data on the live birth rate and delivery rate of centers they are considering, as well as other statistics — such as the number of deliveries per cycle started, delivery per embryo transfer and chance of carrying home a baby per cycle started and per embryo transfer. And prospective parents should ask these questions separately for IVF, intracytoplasmic sperm injection and freeze-thaw cycles.

Prospective parents should also investigate how many cycles the center performs annually; about 100 cycles per year is a minimum. Moreover, they should determine the absolute numbers for these statistics. For example, a fertility center that has a pregnancy rate of 50 percent based on 10 cases has a different significance from one that bases its success rate on 100 cases.

A top-tier fertility center should also be able to provide a comprehensive range of treatment options to allow for the most appropriate method selection at the appropriate stage. Finally, the center should have its own in-house IVF laboratory staffed by a qualified embryologist. Other industry insiders say that potential patients should also consider other factors influencing patient satisfaction with fertility treatments, in-

cluding the atmosphere and overall condition of the facility, staff attitudes and additional options, including the ability to choose the ethnicity of the egg donor.

Singapore boasts at least three world-class fertility centers. The Clinic for Human Reproduction at the National University Hospital in Singapore performs an average of 400 fresh IVF cycles a year.

The Raffles Fertility Center offers a full range of options for couples seeking help in creating a family. The center's assisted-conception menu ranges from simple treatments to the most advanced, including superovulation and intrauterine insemination, in vitro fertilization, intracytoplasmic sperm injection, blastocyst transfer, cryopreservation of sperm and embryos, and advanced infertility laparoscopic and hysteroscopic surgery.

Alternatively, the Raffles Chinese Medicine clinic in Singapore offers a specialist in the use of herbal medicine to improve women's health and treat gynecological conditions, including infertility.

India's health care facilities are offering a growing number of fertility treatments and procedures to foreigners frustrated with disappointing results and soaring costs at home. Among India's Joint Commission International-accredited fertility centers are the Apollo and Wockhard hospitals.

Dr. Aniruddha Malpani, director of Malpani Infertility Clinic in Bombay, says that U.K. and U.S. couples account for about 15



percent of the clinic's patients. According to Malpani, the cost of getting pregnant through IVF treatment can run to \$18,000 a cycle in the West, compared with about \$7,200 for the same treatment in India, including airfare and hotel expenses.

Some Indian clinics will implant six embryos at a time, whereas British clinics only allow two. Multiple implants may increase the chance of getting pregnant, but they also increase the odds of multiple births and the resulting complications. ■

A woman looking at an X-ray of her unborn baby: Asia's best fertility centers offer high success rates and the most up-to-date treatments, at far lower prices than in the West.

Information | Reliable sources

Before traveling abroad for treatment, do your homework

Potential medical-tourism patients should do their homework before booking a ticket and flying off to some foreign land for a checkup or surgery.

"The Web is probably the first stop for patients seeking information," says Tom Johnsrud of Trigram America, a company that consults with U.S. employers and health-plan providers on the rapidly expanding field of medical travel. He adds that it is useful to visit provider Web sites that specialize in the desired medical area.

Given the number of Web sites that provide information on medical travel, this can be daunting for the potential patient. A good place to start is probably an online magazine that does not have a vested interest in any particular procedure, facility or location. One example is Medical Travel Today (www.medicaltraveltoday.com), a free online newsletter that spotlights trends, deals, medical advances and laws.

The recently launched Medical Tourism Association — a global nonprofit group that includes international hospitals, insurance companies, health care companies and medical tourism companies — hopes to bridge the information gap between patients and providers. MTA's three basic tenets are transparency, communication and education. "We are establishing a comprehensive, credible resource for American citizens and citizens from around the world to access information on medical tourism, identify hospitals and providers, and their level of quality of care, and learn about their outcomes," explains MTA President Jonathan Edelhait. "As a pre-eminent voice for the industry, the MTA is also positioned to address inquiries



Medical information at the click of a mouse: The Web offers numerous leads for potential patients.

from government agencies, legislators, employers and insurers."

In July, the MTA announced its Medical Tourism Accreditation Program "to ensure the safety and overall positive results for patients traveling from one country to another." However, this announcement was not followed up by specifics on the basis for accreditation, and many industry insiders thought the announcement was premature.

Laura Carabello, publisher of "Medical Travel Today," says: "Consumers need to be very careful in researching their medical travel options since there are many providers. Web sites and medical travel companies making vague claims regarding 'world-

class' care and 'state-of-the-art procedures.' Accreditation by the Joint Commission International and ISO 9001 (International Society for Quality in Health Care) are the only meaningful 'seals of approval' and provide assurance that quality and safety benchmarks have been achieved by the hospital. However, the onus of determining who's the real deal and who's just claiming to be the real deal falls squarely on the consumer."

The Medical Tourism Association's Web site (www.medicaltourismassociation.com) publishes the online Medical Tourism Magazine, which addresses key issues affecting the industry, with a primary focus on

the quality of health care available at leading international hospitals. Each issue of the magazine covers global issues, but also focuses on a particular country.

Coming soon to the association's Web site is a new documentary video series called "Angels Overseas," which shows patients from North America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia traveling to other countries for health care and lifesaving surgeries. The MTA says these short films will show the "honest truth of what a foreign patient can expect when traveling overseas to a foreign country for surgery and health care." Completion of the series is set for December.

Government-sponsored portals

Other good online information sources include government-sponsored portals such as Malaysia Health Care (www.malaysiahealthcare.com) and SingaporeMedicine (www.singaporemedicine.com), as well as private medical tourism sites such as StarHospitals (www.starhospitals.net), which provides links to counseling from call centers manned by physicians and medical assistants. In addition to rendering advice on hospitals, surgeons, travel arrangements and more, StarHospitals also offers teleconferencing with potential surgeons, password-protected online medical information folders and a "companion service" designed to relieve the stress of family and friends. Similar services include United Kingdom-abroad.org.uk and Treatment Abroad (www.treatmentabroad.net).

Another place to tap information on medical tourism is travel agencies that special-

ize in sending patients abroad. "Medical travel companies play an instrumental role in guiding patients — as well as their travel companions and their loved ones back home — through what can otherwise be a fairly daunting process for them," says Rajesh Rao, chief executive of IndUSHealth (www.indUShealth.com), an agency that links uninsured and self-insured Americans with medical care providers in India.

For those who prefer their information in hard-copy format, the second edition of "Patients Beyond Borders — Everybody's Guide to Affordable, World-Class Medical Travel" has just hit bookstores (and online bookshops). Written by the industry expert Josef Woodman, this is the world's best-selling consumer guide to international health travel. Woodman is also launching updated or brand-new country-specific books, including medical tourism guides to Taiwan, India, Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia.

The medical tourism industry literally takes its act on tour later this year with the debut of the Medical Travel Roadshow (www.themedicalroadshow.com), which will initially touch down in Texas, Virginia, Florida and California. "There will be a wealth of resources on hand to help people discover their options for specialty care, including orthopedic, cardiac, dental, bariatric and cosmetic surgery," says Skip Brickley, director of the road show. "Today, Americans are also interested in opportunities to access care that is not available in the United States, such as stem-cell transplantation and organ transplants, as well as lower-cost in vitro fertilization. People are amazed that these options now exist." ■

Preventive tests | Thorough and affordable

An ounce of prevention: In the region, comprehensive annual checkups cost as little as \$52

Because many health-insurance companies refuse to cover preventive tests, these procedures are often too expensive for many people to undertake in the West. As a result, more and more people are traveling to Asia, not just for medical procedures, but also for extensive checkups.

Piyavate Hospital in Bangkok offers stand-alone and combined test packages. Available packages include those for men over 35 and women over 40, senior males and females, and couples, as well as heart-health-assessment physical examinations (EST) and healthy heart medical checkups (ECHO). Among the stand-alone tests that Piyavate performs are annual gynecological and breast checkups, as well as stress, diabetes, DNA and just about any other type of physical examination. Comprehensive annual health assessments range in cost from 1,800 baht (\$52) for the "basic" package to 5,900 baht for the "supreme" package.

For those who want to combine a holiday with their annual checkup, Bangkok Phuket Hospital offers a range of packages near some of the world's most beautiful beaches and resorts. As part of the Bangkok Hospital Group, BHP has access to a network of 15 private hospitals in Thailand.

Singapore does not claim to be the least expensive location for medicine in Asia, but

it does offer top quality and some of the most advanced treatment options. The island's official medical portal for international patients (www.singaporemedicine.com) has a link to prices for many of the medical tests and procedures available in Singapore.

Preventive medicine has also spread to China, where ParkwayHealth hospitals offer health-screening packages that span a minimum of two visits. On the first day, tests are carried out to get a "full profile of the body system." The following day, patients meet with a physician to review the test results, carry out the physical exam and discuss any recommended treatments. A basic health-screening package costs about \$410.

ParkwayHealth offers similar services in Malaysia. At Gleneagles Medical Center in Penang, the Golden Years Package — which costs 540 Malaysian ringgit (\$160) — is described by the hospital as a "multidimensional diagnostic process intended to determine an older person's medical, psychosocial and functional capabilities/problems." The screening aims to improve the quality of life and promote healthy aging of adults 55 and over.

In the same vein, more and more Westerners are traveling to Asia for their annual dental checkups, as well as for follow-up dental treatments. At Bela Jain Dental Clinic

in New Delhi, a metal-free crown could cost as low as \$200, compared with more than \$5,500 in the United States. A dental implant could cost as much as \$3,500 in the United States but only \$1,000 in India.

Rajesh Rao, chief executive of IndUSHealth, says some of his patients combine relatively inexpensive dental checkups in India with another major medical procedure

(such as a joint replacement) that together justify the cost of the long trip. "We typically recommend against considering going to India only for relatively routine and inexpensive outpatient dental procedures," he says, "since the cost of travel and stay can often eclipse the savings in cost of treatment." However, Rao says that for major dental procedures such as implants and

reconstructive surgeries that may cost more than \$20,000 in the United States, it is certainly worth considering traveling in India just for dental treatment.

"One of our most unique cases involved a patient who needed four sets of dental implants that he had been quoted \$40,000 for and simply could not afford in the United States," says Rao. "He decided to travel to India to be able to realize about \$30,000 in net savings. Despite the challenge of being an amputee with only one functional leg and not being able to justify the expense of taking his wife along, he braved the journey halfway around the world and was overwhelmed by the amount of thoughtful care and attention that he received from everyone that he came into contact with."

In Singapore, the cost of a crown ranges from about 426 Singapore dollars (\$300) at Tan Tock Seng Hospital to 727 Singapore dollars at the National University Hospital. Full dentures (per arch) cost about 236 Singapore dollars at Tan Tock Seng and 754 Singapore dollars at the National Dental Center. Henry Lee Dental Surgery in Singapore is one of several local dental clinics that offer the new "teeth-in-an-hour" treatment, which allows for implants and replacement teeth to be placed at the same time rather than weeks apart. ■



A beach in Thailand: Some hospitals offer packages that combine beach holidays with annual checkups.

Lasik and other ways to improve vision

Continued from page 1

Asia, TRSC International in Thailand was the first such facility in Asia to achieve ISO 9001:2000 certification. The founder of TRSC International, Dr. Ekkhet Chansue, was the first surgeon to perform lasik in his homeland in 1994.

In 1989, Chansue became the first ophthalmologist from Southeast Asia to be invited to join Orbis International, the international nonprofit organization that flies

practitioners around the world in a DC-8 plane converted into an eye hospital on a mission to help combat world blindness.

TRSC recommends a stay of five to seven days in Bangkok to complete the initial eye examination, undergo the lasik surgery (patients can have both the preoperative eye exam and the surgery on the same day), and then have the one-day and one-week follow-up exams. The remaining (routine) checkups can be completed with an ophthalmologist in the patient's home country.

The Lasik Surgery Clinic in Singapore is equipped with two self-contained operating theaters and four laser machines, as well as the necessary diagnostic machines. Maintaining clinical practice in accordance with American and Swiss ISO 9001:2000 standards, LSC offers a combination of VISX STAR S4 Excimer laser with Intralase blade-free technology.

The Singapore National Eye Center performs about 13,000 laser procedures annually, including 7,000 lasik and 6,000 laser

procedures for diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma.

Besides lasik, the Singapore National Eye Center also performs 14,000 major eye surgeries a year. These include dozens of "Tooth-in-Eye" (osteo-odonto-keratoprostheses) operations to restore eyesight for those who have lost theirs due to severe cornea damage. The procedure involves removing a canine tooth from the patient, shaping and drilling it to allow implantation of an artificial plastic corneal device (optical cylinder),

and ultimately implanting it into the affected eye a few months later. The SNEC says it is a world pioneer in conjunctival stem-cell transplant, a technique that entails growing one's own stem cells to treat conditions such as chemical injuries, severe contact-lens overwear and Steven-Johnson's Syndrome.

Meanwhile, Singapore's Raffles Eye Center offers 23-gauge vitrectomy, the latest stitchless retinal eye procedure available in Asia. A minimally invasive procedure, it can treat many vitreoretinal eye problems. ■

Looking for more information? Experts offer advice and tips

There are plenty of sources for information on health care options in Asia. But what does a potential patient look out for while sifting through the information overload?

To help narrow down the focus as far as countries go, Josef Woodman of HealthTraveler.net and author of the "Patients Without Borders" books that are quickly becoming the definitive read on medical tourism, offers the following advice: "We have found that each country offers unique benefits to the medical traveler," he says. "For example, South Korea caters to Japanese clientele because of past cultural ties, and Japanese tourists flock to South Korea for less expensive cosmetic surgery."

Woodman adds: "Singapore is the gold standard of health care, and Western patients take comfort in 13 Joint Commission International-accredited hospitals, squeaky clean surroundings and the fact that English is universally spoken. Malaysia, Thailand and India are known for low prices, combined with excellent health care."

Says Tom Johnsrud, Trigram America's principal and senior consultant to ParkwayHealth Singapore, one of the largest private health-care providers in the island-nation: "Patients as well as employers should look for a number of indicators in a destination and provider." In particular, Johnsrud says, overseas health care facilities should show a commitment to collaborate with physicians and other health care professionals in the patient's country of origin — both before and after care. In addition, patients should be offered direct and easy access to physicians and specialists at the Asian destination. Johnsrud also says that openness is important. The health care facility should give patients access to information regarding pertinent quality indicators and procedure-specific outcomes. They should also allow physical inspection of pertinent patient-care areas.

Johnsrud adds that providers should demonstrate higher internal standards of patient care, safety and satisfaction, "above and beyond what is required from accreditation or local laws and regulations." In addition, before sending their medical records, potential patients should look for providers who demonstrate the same or greater levels of patient confidentiality as at home.

There should be a "blame-free" culture of quality improvement, says Johnsrud, "whereby staff are encouraged to report patient-care concerns and are involved in improving the process." There should also be, he adds, "a level of government oversight that allows for collaboration to improve patient care, safety and satisfaction."

Johnsrud says that a health care destination or facility must not only satisfy all the above preconditions, but also be accommodating to family and caregivers who accompany the patient.

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