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SKIN DEEP

More Fun Than Root Canals? It's the Dental Vacation

By CAMILLE SWEENEY

JENNIFER GATES, 40, a hairstylist and makeup artist from Northern California, hadn't seen a dentist in a decade when she got the call last spring. Her father, Jerry Halley, 64, phoned to say he desperately needed crowns for a few back teeth and other work. Without insurance, Mr. Halley, who owns a landscaping business in Oregon, would have to pay the estimated \$8,000 bill.

"We all needed quality [dental care](#), fast," said Ms. Gates, whose own dental-work estimate was \$20,000 and whose immediate family was also uninsured. "So, I started planning."

Ms. Gates found a reputable dentist through friends of her parents who had traveled to Mexico for care. Six weeks later, Ms. Gates flew to join her parents for a week of massages and tanning in San José del Cabo, Mexico, punctuated, in her case, by daily visits to Dr. Rosa Peña for five procedures including a root canal.

In the last year, Ms. Gates, who had a tooth so deteriorated she could touch its nerve with her tongue, has returned with her parents, husband and 14-year-old son to scuba dive and to open wide for Dr. Peña. Her 20-year-old daughter and son-in-law also have made a trip. All told Ms. Gates's extended clan has had 12 crowns, 6 dental veneers, 4 root canals, over half a dozen fillings, 6 whitening treatments and 2 [broken teeth](#) fixed at a savings, they say, of tens of thousands of dollars. "Dr. Rosy is now our family dentist," Ms. Gates said.

Perhaps this is not everyone's idea of a worry-free family getaway.

Nevertheless, for at least two decades, medical tourism has been an increasingly popular alternative for the uninsured desperate for care, and for middle-class Americans willing to travel to secure affordable health care.

Roughly half a million Americans sought medical care abroad in 2006, of which 40 percent were dental tourists, according to the National Coalition on Health Care, an alliance of more than 70 organizations. That's up from an estimated 150,000 in 2004, said Renee-Marie Stephano, the chief operating officer for the Medical Tourism Association, a nonprofit organization that researches global health care.

Dental bridges and bonding ranked No. 1 and 2 on a list of most sought-after procedures for Americans traveling abroad for medical care, according to a report just published by HealthCare Tourism International, a nonprofit group that tracks health care.

In the latest twist on this trend, families are traveling abroad together, turning an annual vacation into a cost-effective checkup for the brood. Two reasons are at play, according to industry experts: a higher demand for elective dental care like bonding and veneers, and second, the growing number of medical travel agents who vouch for the foreign doctors they recommend. Agents help patients choose between sightseeing-cum-dental packages from Hungary to Mexico and can even arrange a foreign baby sitter for parents in need of fillings.

“You can see where this could be a perfect opportunity to incorporate dental care — not typically treatment that will leave you bed-bound — and a family tour of a new country,” Ms. Stephano said.

There are 75 medical travel agents based in the United States, she estimated, a number she suggested will double by the end of this year.

To allay new customers' fears, many dentists abroad, some of whom have trained in the United States and use the same equipment as American dentists, rely heavily on word of mouth from satisfied customers. Their Web sites include testimonials, and stateside references are provided.

Although the American Dental Association has no official warning against foreign travel for dental care, a spokesman, Dr. Edmond Hewlett, said, “Dentists abroad are not held to the same standards as in the U.S.”

“Teeth are not just appliances,” added Dr. Hewlett, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles School of [Dentistry](#). “They’re not like a car you take in for an annual tune-up. Your oral health affects your general health and vice versa.”

There are two main groups of family-oriented dental travelers, said Neil Patel, the founder of HealthCare Tourism International. Immigrants have long returned to their countries of origin for dental and medical care and to spend time with relatives. But now there’s a more recent wave of patients, interested in taking their families to a far-flung location to make the best out of what is essentially a rather unpleasant chore.

“Call it multitasking, if you will,” said Mr. Patel, who added that he was also seeing improvements in risk management, the transfer of medical records and translator services.

Sometimes patients take relatives along to nurse them (if they need it) and to city-hop with them (if they don’t). That was the case when Robert Mucci, 55, a utilities manager from Valley Stream,

N.Y., contacted Dental-Offer, a dental tourism agency, to book a trip to Mosonmagyaróvár, Hungary, a hot spot for tooth travel.

“I had no idea how I was going to feel, and I wanted to have my family with me as a support system,” said Mr. Mucci, who had several teeth extracted, bone grafting and implants. “It turned out the pain was totally manageable,” said Mr. Mucci, who went with his wife, 24-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son. He still paid a third of what he was told he would have to pay at home, and that included flights. And, since the work was done in less time than he was told it would take at home, he had plenty of time to sight-see in Vienna, Bratislava and Prague.

Most medical tourism agencies do not specialize in tooth travel for families, but it is fast becoming a staple of their business. Just a year ago, Steve Gallegos, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who used to coordinate health care for military families abroad, opened Medcentrek, a medical tourism agency in San Antonio. He has already had dozens of requests for family dental travel.

“We make recommendations not only on the health care end, but also where to stay, what to do, parasailing, deep-sea [fishing](#), you name it,” Mr. Gallegos said. “As people get comfortable with the idea, this kind of family dental vacation could become an annual thing.”

In years past, the farthest that Leona Denison, 30, a cosmetologist from Albuquerque, usually went for a getaway was Arizona. This year, her family of four went to Costa Rica, where she got nine dental implants and three crowns.

“It took a lot of coaxing on my part to get my husband to agree, but Medcentrek helped with all the arrangements,” Ms. Denison said. “We saw waterfalls and volcanoes. My husband went [rafting](#). Being from New Mexico, my girls really loved the ocean.”

Even with travel expenses, she paid \$6,000 less than the \$21,000 price a local dentist had quoted for the work.

Remarkably, some patients argue that a flight and a few hours in the dental chair is less hassle than having to rush back to the office half-sedated. For others, turning a trip to the dentist into a family vacation takes their mind off pending procedures. Lori Sullivan, 43, an administrative assistant in a home health care agency in Port Angeles, Wash., admits that she fears dentists.

Last spring, when she found out she would need an expensive root canal, she decided to book a diverting trip with her 8-year-old daughter to Tijuana, Mexico, through PlanetHospital, a medical tourism agency based in Los Angeles.

“I had heard of this, but had never considered it an option,” Ms. Sullivan said. “Then, I did my research. The procedure went fine and the price was right.”

Her agency hired a baby sitter for her daughter during her root canal, and, she said, they “even arranged to have us driven down to Baja one day where we had lobster and walked along the beach. It was a long weekend we’ll never forget.” She added: “Now, I’m saving up to go back for veneers. My daughter can’t wait.”

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