The Traveling Patient
Domestic medical travel is booming. Here’s why. BY KEVIN FEATHERLY

It was late 2007 and flight attendant Linda Wortman was standing at an airliner’s boarding door in Narita, Japan, greeting passengers. Suddenly, she started coughing and couldn’t stop. “I remember standing and thinking, ‘I am going to choke,’” she says.

Because she was in Japan, she thought she might have caught a case of SARS, the viral illness behind the 2002 Asian pandemic. A youthful and athletic woman who had been flying for three decades at that point, Wortman’s worst previous health scare was a wrist that was shattered so badly that her hometown physicians in western Montana sent her off to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, for reconstructive surgery.

As an employee at Minnesota-based Northwest Airlines (which merged with Delta Air Lines in 2008), Wortman routinely went to Mayo for annual checkups. When that nagging cough showed up, she decided to return and have doctors check it out. On January 9, 2008, she arrived and underwent a computed tomography scan. Two days later, she was wheeled into thoracic
surgery. She had been diagnosed with non-small cell lung cancer.

“I had a tumor, upper left lobe, and it was growing fast,” she says. Though surgeons had to remove a significant portion of one lung, Mayo physicians saved her life and restored her health. In the six years since her surgery, she has run at least one 5K race in every state in the United States and she plans to run a 10K race on every continent.

Shortly after her surgery, Wortman was asked which doctor back home should receive her medical records for follow-up care. “No one,” she said. “I am coming back here.”

Why? “Delta Air Lines has nonstop flights to Minneapolis,” she says. “They can bring me to the best place in the world. So it is worth every penny.”

Wortman is a member of what appears to be a growing class of mobile, savvy and informed American patients who choose to leave home and travel for high-quality medical care elsewhere in the United States.

What motivates patients such as Wortman to pack a suitcase, book a domestic flight and seek care away from home? To answer that, Delta Sky examined three common, often high-acuity surgical specialties: cardiac care, cancer and orthopedics.

### DESTINATION INTEGRATION

You might think that once her Mayo Clinic surgeon removed a portion of her lung to save her from non-small cell lung cancer six years ago Linda Wortman would have been in the clear. True, she was cancer free.

But pain free? Not so much. “You still have nerve-bundle pain,” says the ex-flight attendant who resides in Big Sky, Montana. Her doctors referred her to the Mayo’s own Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program, which specializes in nontraditional, alternative therapies. Once a month, she travels for more integrative therapy.

She is hardly alone. According to the National Institutes of Health National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, nearly 40 percent of Americans use health care approaches developed outside of the mainstream.

Dr. Michael Burcon of Burcon Chiropractic in Grand Rapids, Michigan, treats a variety of conditions, including rare neurological disorders such as Ménière’s disease, which can cause episodes of vertigo. “I currently have 520 Ménière’s disease patients under care, one-half from over 100 miles away. Recently I have seen patients from St. Louis, Brooklyn, Quebec and Oman.”

Josef Woodman, CEO of Patients Beyond Borders, cofounded one of the first preventive medicine websites, MyDailyHealth, in 1998. That site published abundant material on integrative medicine approaches, and Woodman continues to advise leaders in the field.

He says that Gen-Xers and younger patients tend to be most open to alternative techniques. Older patients are not quite so keen to engage in massage therapies, psychophysical integration, homeopathy and the like as a core component of their treatment.

There is skepticism among medical professionals, too, says the Mayo Clinic’s Jan Buckner. That is because, with a few exceptions, there have been few clinical studies documenting evidence of their efficacy, he says.

Nonetheless, such is the draw and therapeutic promise of alternative medicines that some of the biggest names in health care—Mount Sinai Beth Israel, MD Anderson Cancer Center and Duke University among them—have opened either integrative medicine departments or standalone centers.

“Doctors practicing Western medicine used to laugh at us both behind our backs and even to our faces if we let them,” says Burcon. “In today’s marketplace . . . it’s a buyer’s market, especially with the advent of medical tourism, and most patients want all of their health care professionals to get along, so we are all trying harder. That’s a good thing.” —K. F.
Cancer News

Cancer Therapy

Are you making the right choices?

Know your options.
Every cancer is different, as is every cancer patient. Both traditional and integrative oncology therapies should be customized for every treatment plan. It’s important to work with a knowledgeable oncology team to understand your options, how they work, and whether they’re offered at your treatment center.

The importance of nutrition.
Fully eight out of ten cancer patients show symptoms of malnutrition. This can compromise the function of the immune system and weaken the patient. Nutritional therapy is therefore crucial for restoring digestive health and helping you stay strong to maintain your prescribed cancer treatment plan.

What exactly is integrative care?
Treatments for cancer typically consist of some combination of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. The combination of these options with therapies designed to maintain quality of life is known as an integrative approach to cancer care. Therapies to improve energy, maintain the immune system, manage fatigue and guard against malnutrition are all critical. The more therapeutic choices you have, the better you’ll be able to customize a treatment plan that’s right for you. Integrative therapies may include nutritional counseling, naturopathic medicine, physical therapy, chiropractic care, acupuncture, mind-body therapy, meditation and spiritual support.

Naturopathic medicine.
Naturopathic care should also be considered — therapies that help manage symptoms and encourage healing. Naturopathic clinicians address a variety of conditions associated with cancer including digestive issues, nerve damage, respiratory conditions and cancer-related fatigue. Your naturopathic clinician should have extensive knowledge of radiation therapy and chemotherapy, plus a comprehensive understanding of your treatment plan.

Team work.
Surgeons, doctors, clinicians and other oncology professionals should all be part of your care team. It’s also helpful if all your team members are located in the same hospital to facilitate collaboration and speed of care. Having your care team all under one roof allows you to schedule all your appointments at one time, which reduces wait time between appointments and allows you to focus on your treatment.

Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) is a national network of five hospitals in the U.S. with expertise in treating patients who are fighting complex or advanced-stage cancer, although many patients with an early-stage diagnosis seek our expertise as well. We combine world-class treatment with an integrative approach to care to reduce side effects and maintain quality of life during cancer treatment. If you or someone you love has complex or advanced-stage cancer, call 855-587-5528 or go to cancercenter.com.

Care that never quits®
tourism is nothing new. Well-heeled patients have long traveled for the best of care. Her research, published in the American Journal of Managed Care in October 2013, demonstrates that traveling patients are onto something. The study drew on a clinical and financial database maintained by UHC, an alliance of nonprofit academic medical centers and affiliated hospitals. It tracked adult cardiovascular patients who traveled 250 miles or more for procedures at high-volume hospitals in the United States.

Johnson found that patients who did so had clinical outcomes as good as those who checked into high-volume centers within their home regions. On its face that sounds ambiguous, but it is not, Johnson asserts. Not every patient in the United States has access to high-volume hospitals and premium care. Those who, for example, live and work in rural areas or even smaller metropolitan areas far from large hospitals and specialty clinics.

“I think the lesson is that if you don’t have a high-volume provider nearby, traveling to a center of excellence is going to improve your outcome,” she says.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER
Joseph Sabik is chair of the department of thoracic and cardiovascular surgery at the Cleveland Clinic. He was a little late getting to the phone for a scheduled morning interview with Delta Sky. But he can be forgiven, having spent the entire previous night operating on a man who flew five hours to get to Cleveland for emergency heart surgery.

The patient had undergone surgery several years earlier for a different problem, but when a new issue emerged, he turned to Sabik.

Sabik has seen scenarios like that play out many times in his 21 years at the Cleveland Clinic. Only 20 percent of the clinic’s cardiac surgery patients actually live in Cuyahoga County, where the hospital is located, he says. Slightly more than that live elsewhere in Ohio. Fully half travel in from outside the region.

A MEDICAL TOURISM CHECKLIST

Before you make a firm decision to pack a suitcase and head off to some far-away hospital for a medical procedure, Jonathan Edelheit, CEO of the West Palm Beach, Florida-based Medical Tourism Association, advises asking these questions first.

• What is the experience of the surgeon?

• Where did the surgeon go to medical school?

• What is his or her area of specialization?

• Most importantly, how many procedures has that surgeon done in your specialty?

“You want to know that you are going to the best of the best,” Edelheit says. “You don’t want to leave your city to go to another hospital and another doctor who has actually had less experience and performed fewer surgeries than is available back home.”

Other questions on his checklist:

• How transparent is pricing? Unlike some international destinations, few U.S. hospitals currently make their pricing public. Edelheit says. But he says that is beginning to change. Check it out.

• How long will you need to stay in the hospital for recovery? Make sure ahead of time that you won’t be sent home from, say, bariatric surgery before you’re really ready, Edelheit says.

• Is anyone available to travel with you? Edelheit recommends traveling with a companion who can watch out for you and act as a personal patient advocate.

Medical tourism facilitators are an option for some patients. These are third-party agents who help select the right facility for a needed procedure, help book flights and hotels and to some extent act as patient advocates. But be careful—facilitators sometimes get a bad rap because there really are some disreputable agents out there.

If you choose to go the facilitator route, be sure you’re working with someone who won’t steer you to a hospital just to get a fat commission. Edelheit says. His organization, online at MedicalTourismAssociation.com, certifies quality facilitators and can be a resource for finding a reputable one. — K. F.
Sabik says there is a simple explanation. “I think the easiest way to think about why somebody would come to the Cleveland Clinic is obviously to get something that they can’t get at home,” she says.

Partly, that comes down to procedures that physicians are either uncomfortable with or unqualified to perform back home. Examples might include minimally invasive robotic mitral valve repairs, off-pump coronary artery bypass surgeries or arterial revascularizations, she says.

Or it can be because, as was the case with the man he operated on the night before, there is a critical emergency that can’t be dealt with by the home docs. “We do a lot of those,” Sabik says.

Also influencing medical travelers are the clinical studies such as those that are constantly ongoing at the Cleveland Clinic. “We do a lot of research on our own, much of which is based on just looking at our own outcomes,” Sabik says. “It helps us figure out what to do best. So I have to believe that it is one of the main reasons that patients do come here.” When they do, they are in line for the best heart care in the business. U.S. World & News Report has ranked the Cleveland Clinic No. 1 in cardiology and heart surgery 20 years running.

**FIGHTING THE ZOMBIE**

Too often cancer is like a George A. Romero zombie-movie nightmare run amok among a patient’s cells. Its terrifying nature can actually discourage travel.

Jan Buckner, the chair of Mayo Clinic’s department of oncology, says that some patients will choose to stay home to be close to supportive family and friends even when the best care is not available where they live.

But not everyone, says Buckner, who also is deputy director of practice at Mayo’s Cancer Center. Some travel simply for a second opinion. Others go cross-country asking to be admitted for full-on oncology care.

Those who make that choice can do so confidently. U.S. News & World Report ranked Mayo Clinic No. 3 for cancer care in 2014.

Buckner’s experience is similar to Sabik’s—he has been seeing domestic medical travelers for years. Asked why he thinks patients make that choice, Buckner says they usually cite one of three principal rationales:

- They want to know that disease-specific experts are on hand who can treat virtually any type of malignancy. This is generally a characteristic shared only by the biggest and best cancer treatment facilities.

---

**A FAMILY AFFAIR: KIDS TRAVELING FOR TREATMENT**

The rise of domestic medical travel is helping connect patients with the best treatment all over the country, but for the youngest patients and their families, traveling for care can come with extra challenges.

Stacey DiNuzzo, manager of public relations at Seattle Children’s Hospital, says that unfamiliar food, geography and culture are just some of these additional stressors for child patients. However, there are a number of ways to help children feel more at ease in their new surroundings. At Seattle Children’s, staff members take a collaborative and multifaceted approach to treatment: Specialists work directly with children to help them feel more in control of their experience and even go above and beyond to help ease their transition.

“Last year, a 12-year-old patient traveled from Hawaii to Seattle for a life-saving heart surgery and transplant,” says DiNuzzo. “Her one wish while in the hospital at Christmas? To see snow. Child life specialist Wendy Nicon went to the playground outside the hospital, shoveled snow into a pink bucket and brought it to her.”

Parents also have a part to play in helping their children feel comfortable in a new treatment center. “Any hospital visit can be scary for a child, much less one in another state,” says DiNuzzo. “Encourage the child to ask questions and speak up if they are scared or uncomfortable. Most importantly, we ask parents to be their child’s advocate—no one knows the child better than the parent or caregiver.” —Riley Beggan

Dr. Mark Lewin, co-director of the Seattle Children’s Heart Center, visits with a patient.
“When a person is facing a potentially life-threatening illness, the desire to seek out that expertise can be pretty strong,” Buckner says.

- They like an integrated practice model. Patients appreciate when a clinic is structured in such a way that all its cancer experts are together under one roof. They understand, Buckner says, that cancer treatment often requires the involvement of more than one specialist. “Patients mention when they get here that they can’t believe how well organized it is and that the doctors actually talk to each other,” Buckner says.

- They are looking for a technological edge. The most advanced hospitals practice the latest, minimally invasive surgical procedures that eradicate tumors while minimizing collateral damage to surrounding tissues, Buckner says. Mayo has long been among the country’s premier health care systems in that regard, and it is upping the ante. In June 2015, the clinic’s Rochester campus will launch a proton beam therapy center, with another to follow shortly thereafter at its Phoenix campus. “The advantage of the proton beam is that it delivers radiation to the cancerous tissue and spares radiation to the normal tissue,” Buckner says.

“People who want to travel are very highly motivated individuals who often are looking for new therapies that are not commercially available in other places,” Buckner says. “They clearly help advance the science, just by their willingness and desire to try the next best treatment.”

**PRO-AM PATIENTS**

When the Pacific Business Group on Health launched its Employer Center of Excellence Network program early this year, it concentrated on just one medical specialty: orthopedics.

A primary reason for that, says ECEN associate director Olivia Ross, is practical. PBHG runs the California Joint Replacement Registry and so has a lot of in-house expertise. But another reason is that the employers PBGH works with are interested in providing high-quality treatment for workers’ muscular and skeletal conditions that often arise on the job.

---

**“I got a coflex® spinal implant, and now I enjoy my life without that pain in my legs and lower back!”**

- Susan M., Baltimore, MD

If you have lumbar spinal stenosis, you could get relief from your lower back and/or leg pain with a shorter, simpler procedure. No fusion surgery, no long and painful recovery period.* Find out more about coflex® today!

Learn more today!
Get a FREE patient education brochure and find a trained surgeon in your area:

[www.TryCoflex.com](http://www.TryCoflex.com)

Call today! 855-MOTION-2 (855-668-4662)

*Please see coflex® Patient Labeling for a list of all potential warnings, precautions, and risks. Every patient is different; therefore, results may vary. Please contact your healthcare provider for specific medical advice and/or treatment recommendations. Claims based on FDA PMA P00008, October 2012. All data is on file at Paradigm Spine, LLC.
The ECEN opted to work with four care centers—Virginia Mason Hospital in Seattle; Johns Hopkins in Baltimore; Mercy Hospital Springfield in Springfield, Missouri; and Kaiser Permanente Irvine Medical Center in Orange County, California. As of the end of September, the program had processed more than 300 cases.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, professional sports is a source of orthopedics patients. That’s where Bryan T. Kelly comes in.

Kelly is the chief of sports medicine and shoulder service at New York’s Hospital for Special Surgery. Kelly has become something of a superstar in the realm of sports-related hip injuries. He has performed surgeries for a number of sports stars suffering from injuries that threatened to keep them on the sidelines.

The factors that drive star athletes to book a domestic flight to HSS are the same forces that drive other patients. Pro athletes seek out the best doctors for their care because their livelihood depends on their health and mobility, according to Kelly.

But big-time professionals are not the only athletes Kelly treats. He sees many college-level and high school athletes, many of whom have dreams of moving on to the pros.

Kelly reckons people seek him out based partially on the publicity generated by some of his higher-profile patients. But even if no superstas were among his patients, Kelly likely would be a destination doc for athletes at all levels—all the way down to the amateur recreationist. There simply are not many surgeons who

---

“PEOPLE WHO WANT TO TRAVEL ARE VERY HIGHLY MOTIVATED INDIVIDUALS WHO OFTEN ARE LOOKING FOR NEW THERAPIES … THEY CLEARLY HELP ADVANCE THE SCIENCE JUST BY THEIR WILLINGNESS TO TRY THE NEXT BEST TREATMENT.”

— JAN BUCKNER, CHAIR OF MAYO CLINIC’S DEPARTMENT OF ONCOLOGY AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF PRACTICE AT MAYO CLINIC CANCER CENTER

---

Does Your Hand Shake When You…

Drink a glass of water? Write a note? Dial a phone number?

If so, you may be suffering from Essential Tremor. Our team from the Swedish Radiosurgery Center has successfully treated patients for over 15 years — using Gamma Knife, a non-surgical approach to treat Essential Tremor.

Learn more about Essential Tremor and find out if Gamma Knife treatment is right for you.

1-206-320-7187  Swedish.org/essentialtremor
Seattle, Washington, USA

---

SUPERDOCTORS

RON NOY, MD

Dr. Ron Noy is a board-certified orthopaedic sports medicine surgeon specializing in four knee and shoulder injuries, specifically ACL, meniscus, labrum and rotator cuff. Dr. Noy has extensive experience in orthoscopic outpatient cutting-edge techniques and has perfected a recovery program that gets most patients back to work and sports quicker and often without pain. He is yearly named one of New York Magazine’s “Best Sports Medicine Doctors” among many other accolades. Many celebrities and athletes fly from all over the world for his expertise. He is literally treated as a VIP. Dr. Noy gives you ample time to make sure you understand your diagnosis and options, and if surgery is necessary, he personally performs it from incision to closure.

Prestige Orthopaedics & Sports Medicine
424 Madison Avenue, Floor 9
New York, NY 10017
646-802-0180
Noy@PrestigeSportsMedicine.com
deal with the specific sports-related hip injuries in which he specializes.

Like other clinicians, Kelly thinks that a key draw for patients is the clinical research HSS can do simply based on the sheer volume of procedures it performs and the accompanying patient outcomes data it generates.

In the case of HSS, that has led to advancements in biologics, biomechanical and soft-tissue procedures and therapies. It has also spurred improvements in rehabilitation—even leading to better on-the-field training and performance. “Any research that allows you to be a better adviser or clinician or a better surgeon, in terms of understanding anatomical variations and surgical treatments,” Kelly says, “I think that is the research that we should be focusing on as clinicians.”

That is one reason why Kelly would not be happy treating only superstars—as much as he enjoys it. “You feel like you’ve made a real difference at a high level,” he says. “But it is also fun to take care of a high school athlete who is just having a lot of pain with daily living. You can help him get back to a healthy life.”

---

**Burcon Chiropractic Research Institute**

Meniere’s Disease Research

Grand Rapids, MI

[616.575.9990](tel:616.575.9990)

BurconChiropractic.com

Have you been struggling with a pain or problem that you have been told, “You just have to learn to live with it?” Then watch Health Talk!

~ Rhonda Tomasi

Receive a Complimentary Consultation from the World’s Leading Meniere’s Expert!

Dr. Michael T. Burcon, B.Ph., D.C.

Relief Could Be A Phone Call Away! [616.575.9990](tel:616.575.9990)