

THE GAMBLE OF MEDICAL TOURISM

Numerous patients are emerging from obesity surgeries abroad with unsatisfactory results, health complications or traumatic experiences – we find out why cheap medical packages aren't worth comprising your health for



In an interview with Vanessa Feltz broadcast earlier this year on BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour, a senior bariatric surgeon recalled how Feltz's decision to have gastric band surgery overseas was greeted with dismay by British doctors. Mr David Kerrigan (who has also advised the Government on the NICE obesity guidelines), said "a collective groan" went up among the UK's leading bariatric (weight loss) clinics when she revealed her gastric band was fitted in Belgium.

And it seems Feltz isn't the only one; in recent years, many patients from the UK have chosen to travel overseas for obesity surgery for reasons including a perceived lower cost, shorter waiting lists, attractive location, and opportunity to combine surgery with a short 'holiday'.

Of course, on the face of it, having surgery in a hot, sunny country for less money seems a much more attractive choice; but it's important to remember that things can go wrong – and if they do, it's much harder to manage when patients (or the surgeon they want to re-visit) are overseas. Would you have an unending supply of time and money to return overseas for aftercare, if something went wrong?

"The only potential advantage of health tourism is that, on the face of it, surgery in Europe would appear to be a bit cheaper," says Mr Kesava Mannur, General Surgeon specialising in Bariatric Surgery. "However, once the cost of proper aftercare is added in, the difference between Europe and the UK often amounts to just a few hundred pounds. What really worries me is that people who opt for cut price surgery overseas are often unaware of just how important medically supervised aftercare is. They rarely receive the post-op support that is so critical for a safe and effective outcome. This is particularly vital with gastric bands, which are not a 'magic cure', but simply a tool to aid weight loss. Patients need to be shown how to use them properly – and that training needs constant support and reinforcement if they are to get a good, safe result.

"Sometimes complications, such as band slippage or erosion, can set in months - or even years - after the operation is performed. If picked up and dealt with promptly, most of these problems can be safely treated by a bariatric surgeon without the risk of losing the band. Do you really want to be hundreds of miles and several hours away from your surgeon if anything goes wrong?"

"It's a question of being able to pick up the phone and talk to someone knowledgeable who can put your mind at rest when you're not sure that things are going as they should, or get you sorted out quickly without you having to travel for hours to see them if something goes wrong."

Unfortunately, there have been many cases where foreign clinics do not provide any aftercare and although they may tell patients this is a 'standard' package, it is vital that aftercare is included, whichever country you are in.

It is also not uncommon for British surgeons to treat post-surgery complications in those who would not have been accepted for this type of surgery in the UK. British guidelines have strict criteria for bariatric admissions as weight loss surgeries can be risky. When complications of this nature arise, it is often NHS surgeons or small private clinics who try to correct these 'mistakes', but these overstretched medical teams do not always possess the specialist knowledge and training to deal with such cases.

The Wellington Hospital is one of the UK's leading private medical centres, and the bariatric unit has a wealth of experience. Treatments available at The Wellington include the gastric band via keyhole (laparoscopic) surgery and the relatively non-invasive technique of the intra-gastric balloon (which remains inflated to occupy most of the stomach, limiting the space available for food). Dr. Shidrawi acknowledges that these types of surgery are very effective, but ultimately he is keen to emphasize that these are risky procedures, complications are not infrequent and it is always important to seek out the best medical professionals and the highest standard of aftercare to guarantee the desired results.

For more information about bariatric surgery at The Wellington Hospital, call the Enquiry Helpline on 020 7483 5148 or visit www.thewellingtonhospital.com

SURGERY GONE WRONG

Other high-profile patients who have travelled abroad for gastric band surgery include Anne Diamond, who like Vanessa Feltz, had a gastric band fitted in Belgium. She described the result as an "unedifying failure" due to lack of supervision and band adjustments. It later appeared that the band had been put in the wrong place, requiring a second bariatric operation at a private hospital in the UK.

DID YOU KNOW?

10-15 per cent of gastric band patients will eventually have complications (such as band slippage or erosion) that will require further corrective treatment.