

Statement of
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the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS)
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United States Senate

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Good morning Chairman Smith, ranking member Kohl, and Members of the Committee. My name is Bruce Cunningham, MD. I am a board certified plastic surgeon practicing in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Plastic Surgery at the University of Minnesota, and the current president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS). I want to thank the committee for inviting me to appear today to discuss medical tourism. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons is the largest organization of board-certified plastic surgeons in the world with more than 6,000 members.

There has been a lot of attention on the growth of “medical tourism” as patients explore crossing borders or continents for care. ASPS has become increasingly concerned about the growth of medical tourism, particularly elective cosmetic surgery. Although numerous factors are likely involved in the growth of medical tourism, there is at least anecdotal evidence to suggest that patients considering medical care outside of the United States do so primarily through a price-driven lens.

The ASPS has a longstanding commitment to enhancing patient safety and improving the quality of care for patients. We believe that some of the best plastic surgeons in the world are our Board Certified members, here in the United States.

For those who choose to go overseas for elective surgical procedures, there are a number of critically important issues to consider. We believe patients should make this decision very carefully. In essence, “buyer beware.” Without a complete understanding of the medical standards for the health institution or facility, medical providers, surgical training, credentials, and post-operative care associated with surgery, a patient can be ill-informed and worse, at significant risk.

Foremost, surgery is serious business. Cosmetic surgery is no different from other surgical procedures. Every surgery, including cosmetic surgery, has a degree of risk. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, I manage and reduce risk every day. Patients who choose to travel abroad for a cosmetic surgery vacation with price as a driving force in their decision making can exponentially increase their risk factors. These patients are highly susceptible to unwanted and in some cases, disastrous outcomes. We are all aware of cases, which are reported

in the media and which confront some of my colleagues and other physicians, of patients returning to this country with disfigurement and nearly fatal infections associated with unaccredited hospitals and unlicensed providers. Patients simply cannot make informed decisions about medical care, or establish a proper physician patient relationship from travel brochures.

Some medical tourism trips are marketed as vacations. Risks may increase when procedures are performed during cosmetic surgery vacations. Although enticing, vacation activities are not appropriate for recovery after cosmetic surgery. Precautions and appropriate care must be received in order for the patient to properly heal and reduce the possibility of complications. Infections are the most common complication seen in patients that go abroad for cosmetic surgery. Other complications include unsightly scars, hematomas, and unsatisfactory results. Travel combined with surgery can also significantly increase risk of complications. Patients should be aware long flights and surgery combined can further increase the risk of developing pulmonary embolism and blood clots and thus should plan accordingly.

Complications can also occur during surgery in even the best hands, and may require acute care hospitalization. An important consideration is whether the quality of the health institution and/or medical provider is truly comparable to what the patient would receive at home. In some cases, the answer may be yes. In other cases, the patient may be taking a huge gamble with their health and well being.

Also, in many cases, post-operative care is nearly as important as the procedure itself. Follow-up care and monitoring is a critical part of any surgery. How, by whom, and for how long will those services be provided? Depending on the procedure, even routine post-operative follow-up such as dressing changes and monitoring healing takes place for up to several weeks. The patient should consider who will be providing this care once he or she returns home.

In addition, the potential for post-surgical complications--as with any surgery—present particular challenges for the medical tourism patient. What happens to the patient once they have returned home if they have a complication or are unhappy with their results? Do they fly back to where they had the procedure? Not likely in many cases. Do they have insurance coverage for complications resulting from elective procedures overseas? Patients should be aware that their insurance company likely will not cover complications for their procedure, as we know in the case of elective cosmetic procedures.

Surgeon training and credentials as well as facility standards may also not be verifiable. In order for cosmetic surgery to be performed safely, it requires the proper administration of anesthesia, sterile technique, latest instrumentation and equipment, as well as properly trained surgeons. Patients need to ask a lot of questions.

Is the practitioner providing the medical procedure appropriately certified? For instance, a physician with training and credentials in internal medicine probably should not be performing abdominoplasty, face lifts, breast augmentation, or breast reconstruction post-mastectomy among others. In the US, the American Board of Medical Specialties provides the Gold Standard for

verification of training and credentials. There are 24 member specialty boards, one of which is the American Board of Plastic Surgery.

For some developing or third world countries, there is no credible process for verifying physician training, education, and experience. Further, there are no US laws that protect patients or mandate the training and qualifications of physicians who perform plastic surgery outside of the US. There also may be no legal recourse if surgical negligence by the physician or facility occurs.

Another important question the patient should ask is whether the facility is accredited, licensed, or appropriately certified. In the US, there are rigorous rules and regulations regarding the availability of emergency equipment and appropriately trained staff. Standards overseas are highly variable and patients may take unnecessary risks when they unknowingly do not have adequate information.

Although there are many skilled and qualified physicians practicing all over the world in outstanding surgical facilities, ASPS cautions patients to consider these critically important patient safety issues. Patients should have all the information they need to make a truly informed decision and one with their best health in mind.

We hope this discussion is helpful to the committee in considering this important issue.

Thank you.