

## **Plastic surgery: Out-of-town medical care can be a complex issue**

**By Dr. Alan Muskett**

You learn all kinds of stuff when you read the newspaper. A few weeks ago The Gazette carried an article in the Health section about U.S. citizens seeking surgical procedures in foreign countries (High costs send patients overseas for medical care, Jan. 10).

Instead of paying more than \$200,000 to have a heart valve operation at Duke, the patient quoted in the article had the procedure performed in India for \$6,500, which also included an oil change and vacuuming. Apparently the hospital in India was beautiful and clean and the service was great.

On Jan. 1, another Gazette article profiled my retired senior partner, Dr. Walt Peet (Retired Plastic Surgeon Helps Those in Need, Jan 1). He described a mission trip to India to repair cleft lips and palates. I spoke to Walt after his return, and he related the challenge of doing complex surgery with primitive equipment in squalid facilities.

Yet another wire service article reported the fact that although India was in the midst of dramatic economic growth, half of the children there were malnourished. I've always suspected that a deep sense of irony was a requirement to be a newspaper editor.

I don't doubt that you can get heart surgery, liposuction, a new hip, or a sex-change operation overseas for a bargain, including an attractive tote bag with a set of Ginsu knives inside.

I'm not going to debate the quality of the care delivered in these places because I don't really know. But let's take a broader look at the "social contract" and what constitutes the kind of society in which we wish to live.

Let's say, for the purposes of argument, that you are a drunk 19-year-old screaming down the wrong side of Grand Avenue at 80 miles an hour on your Kawasaki at 2 a.m., and, bummer, you hit a one-ton Dodge Ram head on. Or, you are a 2-month-old baby with a cleft lip and palate and your mommy is a meth head in jail. Perhaps you are a hard working but uninsured 45-year-old that has a sudden heart attack. What kind of medical care will you get?

The answer is that you will get the best state-of-the-art care available.

The above three cases will likely generate more than \$1 million of hospital, physician and long-term care charges that will never be paid. Health insurance premiums will go up, taxes will rise to cover the Medicaid costs and charges will rise to cover the deficit. But as a society, we are unwilling to let people go without care, for which we should be rightfully proud.

The countries that offer discount medical tourism don't do things that way. They let poor kids live

with gross deformities and let them go hungry while cheerfully collecting cash from Americans. Compassion is expensive.

Let's take another angle. There is a high-volume auto dealer in Idaho that offers great prices on new vehicles. Many Montanans (including the incumbent governor) have purchased vehicles there. I have not. Why? Because every time I look around, I see Underriner sponsoring the symphony, Bob Smith doing Summerfair and Denny Menholt supporting Montana State University-Billings. Our office could buy office products online, but Frank Cross at Reporter paid 500 bucks for a green cake made by a high school boy at a Billings Catholic School auction. Medical care is big business in Billings, employing thousands, driving the economy, and most importantly, taking care of us when we need it the most.

What about quality? I have heard "Ooh, I need heart surgery, that's a big deal; I should go to the Mayo Clinic or the Texas Heart Institute." Here's the reality. Although fine institutions, they are training hospitals, and your heart surgery may be performed by someone who is quite possibly doing their first heart surgery.

Or, you could stay in Billings and have your heart surgery done in top-ranked hospitals by a graduate of one of those programs, the difference being that Drs. Dernbach or Millikan or Winton have done thousands of heart operations. These guys will also be there to hold your hand and take care of a problem if there is one. If you have a complication and your surgeon is thousands of miles away, then what?

How about sneaking off to Vegas for a breast augmentation or a face lift?

I could make the argument that the cosmetic boys in Vegas don't take care of Billings trauma victims or kids with congenital deformities. I could say "try calling a Vegas cosmetic surgeon when your kid cracks open his head at 2 in the morning," but I won't (or maybe I just did). But that aside, some folks worry about confidentiality. They don't want anyone to know they have had cosmetic surgery. I can assure you that all kinds of people you know have had cosmetic surgery in Billings and you don't know it, because we are exquisitely careful about confidentiality.

Price is always a consideration. Some high-volume operators in larger areas offer low prices, but at the cost of personal attention and follow-up. By the time travel costs are thrown in, it isn't a deal at all.

What if you have a complication? Who pays for it? Do you go back to Vegas?

Finally, marginal surgeons hide in big places, and often the only thing they do well is market. If you aren't good in a smaller town, you are gone quickly.

Out-of-town medical care is a complex issue. Our community supports, enriches, and sustains us.

As individuals, we must do the same for our community. In the end, all altruism aside, we want the best care. After having worked in more than 30 hospitals in four major universities, when I or a member of my family needs it done right, it will be done right here.

*Dr. Alan Muskett is a board-certified plastic surgeon at Billings Plastic Surgery. More information is available at [www.billingsplasticsurgery.com](http://www.billingsplasticsurgery.com).*