

NOTE WORTHY



BYPASSING THE U.S.

Some 150,000 Americans hop flights each year for medical procedures in foreign lands, according to the AMA. Almost all of these patients are self-payers looking for the deep discounts available in countries like India, Panama, and South Korea. But both the number and the nature of these patients may be about to explode if the latest trend in medical tourism catches on: Insurers footing all or part of the bill.

Some payers are now offering coverage for medical tourism, seeking their own savings on expensive procedures such as bypass surgery and hip replacements. Aetna, CIGNA, and several Blue Cross/Blue Shield plans are among the large payers offering or considering offering medical tourism plans, according to MSNBC. McKinsey & Co., an insurance consulting firm, speculated that if the trend holds, the number of U.S. citizens traveling abroad for medical procedures could balloon to as many as 700,000 annually within a few years.

“You’re beginning to see the point now that it’s changing from a market primarily of individuals without coverage or insurance to a circumstance in which this is going to be adopted by U.S. health insurance plans to extend to a much larger U.S. population,” argues Arnold Milstein, chief physician for Mercer Health & Benefits, an international healthcare consulting agency.

Then again, if oil prices keep rising, the price of an international plane ticket might be the priciest aspect of a typical medical tourism trip.

WANNA POP (A PILL)?

In-house medication dispensing is not new, but we think QuiqMeds’ unique vending-machine approach bears some notice. It’s 100 percent automated, with physicians simply ordering a prescription through the touch-screen and patients picking up their meds at checkout. The machine’s housing even looks like its sugar-spewing cousin. And just as a soda machine is on lockdown, no one at the practice can open — or need worry about refilling — the machine’s products. QuiqMeds (www.quiqmeds.com) takes care of all of that. Now if it just dispensed lattes ...

