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Britons flock to India for fast, cheap surgery

By Peter Foster in New Delhi

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When Karen Holman arrived at New Delhi airport to be confronted by the din and chaos of India's capital city, she could have been forgiven for wondering if she had made a dreadful mistake.

"We went outside the terminal and were hit by a wall of heat - the smell and the crush of people. Some were sleeping rough in rags on the streets," she said. "It is quite a culture shock."

	Heart bypass	Hip replacement	Cataract operation UK
Britain	£15,000	£9,000	£2,900
France	£13,000	£7,600	£1,000
US	£13,250	£15,900	£2,120
India	£4,300	£3,180	£660

However for Mrs Holman, 38, of Bognor Regis, a special constable with Sussex police, the pain in her left knee, exacerbated by a nine-hour flight, was reminder enough of her reason for coming.

Fed up of waiting for an NHS operation - her case was considered non-urgent even though she couldn't move without crutches - she decided to take the "Indian option".

Her case is indicative of a trend of medical "tourism" to India that began as a trickle but in the last 12 months has grown "exponentially", according to one medical services company.

The formula for India's medical outsourcing industry is no different from its credit-card processing and call centre businesses: it offers a first world service at near third world prices.

Mrs Holman's keyhole surgery on a damaged knee would cost up to £9,000 in the UK. But at the Apollo Hospital, New Delhi, the same operation is just £1,400.

However, for many patients such as Mrs Holman it is not the affordability but the speed and availability of service that are India's biggest draw. She wanted her life back.

"When my whole leg went numb and I was housebound on crutches, in despair one night I went to A&E to try to see a duty orthopaedic surgeon. I couldn't do any of the things I loved - walk the dog, go to the gym, ride a bike.

"In the end I saw a house officer who basically said 'go home and wait for your operation', which we were told would take 'months'."

A call to a Warwickshire-based company, The Taj Medical Group, began the process that ended in Mrs Holman having a surgery appointment in three weeks.

"We were able to check out the surgeon's qualifications on the internet - he was trained in Britain - and he

e-mailed us with his mobile phone so we could chat through any concerns. It was incredible," said Mrs Holman's husband, John.

Mrs Holman landed back at Heathrow this week and left the aircraft without the aid of crutches, which she left at the hospital in Delhi for use by a charity.

"I wouldn't hesitate recommending coming here," she said. "Our experience has been brilliant. I came to have one knee done but in the end I've had the other fixed too, to save me coming back again."

Across the corridor from Mrs Holman's private hospital room another English family had also decided that paying out some of their savings was preferable to waiting their turn on the NHS.

Karen Knott, a design engineer from Dorchester, said her 14-year-old son, Elliot, was walking "five inches" taller after a £4,700 operation on his spine to correct an injury suffered in an ice-skating accident last New Year's Eve.

The same surgery would have cost £25,000 in Britain or could have been done for free on the NHS after a 17-week wait to see a specialist and a further nine months for surgery.

"Elliot was virtually housebound and in pain. I couldn't watch him suffer that long. He starts his GCSE year in September and without the operation there was little or no prospect of him going back to school on time. Now we expect he'll make it," said Mrs Knott.

India's hi-tech private hospitals believe that such stories will attract Britons in ever growing numbers.

Companies such as The Taj Medical Group aim to make the trip as comfortable as possible, insulating clients from the "real" India beyond the hospital gates. "We try to take the stress out of coming," said the company's director, Jagdish Jethwa. "We hold the patient's hand at every step, fixing everything. Visas, passports, tickets, transfers - the lot."

The usually slow-moving Indian government, perhaps spurred on by a report that estimated medical tourism could net India £1.2 billion in the next seven years, has also been uncharacteristically proactive, setting up a system to fast-track medical visas.

At a rival facility, Dr Narendra Kumar Pandey, head of surgery at Escorts Hospital, believes that the combination of high quality and low prices will bring Europeans to India in droves.

"My post-operative cardiac infection rates [less than 0.5 per cent] compare extremely favourably with any British or American hospital," he said. "This started as a trickle - hips, hernias, hearts, cosmetic and cataract surgery - but the flood is coming. I have no doubt about that."

- The number of people waiting for an operation in English hospitals is the lowest for 17 years, the Government said yesterday. At the end of last month the figure was 813,700, a fall of 10,200 since June; of 59,900 since July last year; and of 344,000 since March 1997. Only 15 patients had been waiting longer than nine months for surgery, two of them for more than a year.