

First Business

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MEDICAL KINGDOM

Coming to heal, staying to play

The economic impact of 'medical tourists' — patients who come for extended treatment — is quite noticeable, which is why both the region's hospitals and tourism bureaus are trying to paint the First Coast as a medical destination.

By **URVAKSH KARKARIA**
The Times-Union

When it comes to beckoning visitors, Miami plays up South Beach, Orlando touts Mickey Mouse and Jacksonville presents the Mayo Clinic.

No kidding.

The First Coast's marketing mandarins are pitching the region's blue-chip medical assets, including the Southeast's only proton therapy center, as a way to attract a new kind of visitor: Eamonn Keegan.

The 66-year-old, who suffers from prostate cancer, is considered a medical tourist — someone who travels to the region for medical care.

Keegan flew nearly 3,000 miles from his home in suburban San Francisco for two months of treatment at the University of Florida Proton Therapy Institute at Shands Jacksonville.

For about half the cost, which does not include treatment costs, Keegan could have gotten proton therapy at Loma Linda's University Medical Center, east of Los Angeles, where his daughter lives. Yet, he jetted cross-country with his wife and two dogs after being wowed by the local institute's medical staff, quality of care and facilities.

"If [the proton therapy institute] had been in Swampville, Florida, I think I would also have gone there, because of the quality," Keegan said, his Irish lilt giving away his roots. "At the end of the day, this is the place where I thought I'd be cured, where [I'd] get the best help and best physicians."

Medical tourism is another way to brand Jacksonville, local tourism czar John Reyes said.

"We may be known for our beaches and golf," said Reyes, president of the Jacksonville & the Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau. "But, we're really looking for the opportunity to give tourists another reason to discover Jacksonville."

Promoting the area's hospitals and medical facilities is a different approach to selling the destination, said Nancy Hinds, spokeswoman with the Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association.

"The competition for tourists and conventions is unbelievable," Hinds said. "You have to promote the assets that you have."

Medical tourism is niche market, said Bill Geist, president of Zeitgeist Consulting, a Madison, Wis.-based tourism consultant.

"There's not a lot of people competing for [medical tourist dollars]," he added, "not because ... it's not lucrative, it's because most [communities] don't have the [medical] facilities to attract people from outside the area."

Global appeal

Liana Khachatryan is multi-tasking in Jacksonville. The 21-year-old Armenian is visiting her cousin while also getting treatment for her severe astigmatism from Arun Gulani, a sartorially-gifted ophthalmologist with a penchant for pocket squares.

Khachatryan's blurred vision, caused by abnormally shaped corneas, is so bad she can barely see inches from her face, said Gulani, the first eye surgeon in Florida to perform an artificial corneal transplant. Treatment involves inserting plastic rings into the corneas to flatten them, possibly followed by advanced laser

surgery. Khachatryan considered getting treatment in Moscow, which would be closer to home, but chose Jacksonville because of Gulani's reputation and high-touch care.



EMILY BARNES/The Times-Union

Arun Gulani monitors Liana Khachatryan's eye at the gulani Vision Institute. Khachatryan sought treatment in Northeast Florida instead of Moscow, which would be closer to her home in Armenia. She's part of a growing trend of medical tourists.

If Khachatryan's looking for things to do in between eye appointments, she should talk to Maria Helena Camacho de Correia. The Venezuelan freelance writer has been flying to local Mayo Clinic campus from Caracas for the past 10 years. She is among 28 percent of patients who travel from outside Northeast Florida, drawn by the platinum-plated Mayo brand. "In Latin America the Mayo Clinic name, the brand, is well known," said Nancy Skaran, international administrator. "They know [Mayo], but they don't know we're in Jacksonville, Fla." Correia first came to the Jacksonville campus while battling breast cancer. The cancer

has gone, but Correia continues to visit Mayo for annual medical checkups, drawn by its efficiency and attentive service. The checkup and medical tests take about a week at Mayo, Correia said through an interpreter. Getting the same checkup in Venezuela would take about six months.

While making the trip to the United States for medical care is expensive and time consuming, Correia said, it's money well spent. "It's not a good idea to have a lot of money," she said, "and not have health."