

Dental Vacations: Save Money, Increase Risk, Do Your Homework

By [George Gombossy](#) | Mar 27, 2010

Due to lousy teeth from childhood on, Anna Baker was facing a difficult decision as an adult: get dentures or spend more than \$50,000 for implants. But after seeing a story on CNN about a woman who saved thousands of dollars by going overseas for dental work, Baker, of Westchester County, decided to look into that alternative.

She tracked down the woman, talked with friends, did Internet research, and decided to go to Argentina in 2008. In two visits, one that year and one last year, Baker, an executive assistant, had all her teeth replaced with implants at a cost of \$26,000, including flights, hotel, meals and the dental treatment.

And when all the work was done, she went to see her dentist, who Baker said approved the work.

"I came back with a good set of choppers," Baker told me. "It's not as if they are doing something different there" than in the United States.

Baker is one of hundreds of thousands of Americans and Western Europeans choosing to go to developing countries each year for major medical work — especially dental work that isn't covered by insurance — for a fraction of the cost they would pay at home. They are going to Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, Hungary, Thailand and Romania, among other places, where they frequently find American-trained dentists and doctors.

But many U.S. dentists caution against leaving the country for dental surgery. They warn that consumers are taking serious risks by going overseas, where sanitary standards may not be as high, and there may be no recourse in case of errors, no central place for rating medical professionals and potential language problems.

Dr. Steve Farley, my dentist in Windsor — a perfectionist who has been an expert witness in court cases — said he has seen some substandard dental work that was done overseas. He said some dentists will not work on patients whose teeth were botched by others.

Two dentists who also teach at dental colleges agree, and suggest that people like Baker may come to regret the decision. While there are American-trained dentists in other countries, they said, few continue to receive post-doctoral training.

Dr. Edgard El Char, a clinical associate professor with the Department of Periodontics and Implant Dentistry, and surgical director at the Continuing Education Dental Implant Program at the New York University College of

Dentistry, and a visiting professor at St. Joseph University in Beirut, Lebanon, said Thursday in a telephone interview that crowns made in other countries are not made as well as the ones in the U.S.



Dr. Edgard El Chaar

Dr. El Chaar said that what many patients don't realize is that major surgery involving implants should be done over several months. Rushing it in one or two short vacations can result in serious infections.

One patient, he said, had such a serious infection that when he pulled the implant out, pus oozed from the hole. He said many dentists refuse to work with patients who have complications from overseas work, because of potential liability.

Dr. Greg Diamond, another highly respected New York periodontist, said there are cheaper alternatives than coming to him, and safer methods than going out of the country.

Dr. Diamond suggests that those who can't afford him look into having dental work done at a teaching hospital. They can also get zero-percent financing through credit card companies that pay dentists up front, but take a percentage of the fee for providing the credit.

He said that before getting implants on the recommendation of a general dentist, patients should get a second opinion from a periodontist to determine whether the problem is with the gums or with the teeth. If the problem is gum disease, he said, there are now relatively inexpensive laser treatments that can eliminate the need for implants. However, he said, not all dentists will recommend that treatment as their practice may include implants.

Baker, however says there is no question in her mind that she made the right decision. A close friend of hers, Robin Apton, and Robin's brother, Jeff Apton launched a business that send patients to dentists they selected in Panama. Robin



Dr. Greg Diamond

holds both BS and MS degrees from Columbia University School of Dental and Oral Surgery, Division of Dental Hygiene. She has thirty years of experience practicing as a registered dental hygienist (RDH) and has taught at the University level at Columbia and the University of Bridgeport. Baker said if Robin Apton's business were available back in 2008, she would have used it. Robin and her brother Jeff went to Panama to personally check five dental practices and ended up choosing three whom they refer patients for a fee.



Jeff Apton

Apton has owned two Medical Education agencies working in the US and internationally and now serves as Vice Chairman and counselor for the northwest area Connecticut Chapter of SCORE, a non-profit association that has helped over 8.5 million small businesses owners across the US since its founding in 1964.



Robin Apton

Well, the bottom line is that there is a lot to consider. Facing the possibility of major dental surgery, I think it's wise to get a second opinion from a specialist to make sure that it's not just gum disease that is the problem. That is much cheaper to repair. A teaching hospital or a dental university also makes sense.

If you still want to go out of the country I would suggest doing your homework, insist that you want to talk to patients who had surgery more than five years ago, and plan on spending more than a week or two to make sure that the dentist has plenty of time. But then Panama, Costa Rica and Argentina would be wonderful places to spend a month or more.