

Thai teeth the new medical frontier as Australian dentists price patients out of market

Facelifts are ever-popular but dental implants are leading the new wave of medical tourism luring middle-class Australians to Asian clinics.

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The breakfast room at Bangkok's Somerset Park hotel – ground zero for Australian women seeking cut-price plastic surgery – is not for the faint-hearted.

Table after table is occupied by women at various stages of healing, some with compression bandages around swollen faces and bruising that graduates from black to blue and yellow.

For almost two decades, the central Bangkok apartment hotel has played host to a thriving medical tourism business that began as a conduit for Western women looking for cheaper breast enhancements and liposuction.

As those surgeries have become cheaper at home, or been superseded by less invasive weight loss jabs, its services have moved with shifting demand and

demographics; from young women seeking boob jobs to older women seeking facelifts, post-weight loss skin removal surgery and, increasingly, dental work.

Martin Olsen says his Destination Beauty business is now organising more than 1000 facelifts a year, though increasingly clients are seeking surgery to remove loose skin after dramatic weight loss, a lengthy operation that can cost three times as much in Australia as in Thailand.

“We have made plastic surgery available for normal people,” Olsen tells The Australian, insisting there’s a lot less stigma around medical tourism now than even 10 years ago.

“It is widely accepted because thousands of Australians have surgery in Thailand. They know the hospitals provide a much better service. They have a lot more staff. We have had clients come back four, five or six times and they swear by Thailand.”

Certainly many of the Somerset clients appear to be on a post-surgical high, though one young woman confides quietly over the cereal bar that her sister is still in hospital with complications after losing too much blood during breast reduction surgery.

“It was terrifying,” she says. “No one told me anything about it.”

While surgical beauty trends may wax and wane in Thailand’s lucrative medical tourism landscape – and not everyone has a positive experience – by far the most sought after medical procedure in Thailand by Australians is dentistry.

So much so that Olsen, too, is about to open a dental surgery to service the market for expensive veneers, crowns and the increasingly popular “all-on-four” fixed dentures on implants that in Australia is not covered by Medicare and can cost up to two-thirds of an average annual wage.

He faces stiff competition in Thailand where a dentist on seemingly every corner offers similar services to foreign patients like Hervey Bay retiree Malcolm Meadows, whose path to a Bangkok clinic began earlier this year when another loose tooth fell out in his hand.

“I showed it to my wife and said ‘I have to do something about this. I’m 76 now. We probably have 10 good years left. We have to work out what are our priorities in life and start doing them’,” he told The Australian.

So Mr Meadows went to his local dentist, who offered to fix them for \$67,000, a quote nowhere near as rare as you would hope, judging from the remarkably similar stories recounted by half a dozen other dental tourists who spoke to The Australian.

“I said ‘That’s a BMW. Are you serious?’ I started talking to friends about it and they all started opening up about going on holiday and getting their teeth done. It’s really strange. Once they know you want to know, they’re quite willing to tell you about it.

“But I think people are a bit embarrassed to admit it.”

By the time Mr Meadows landed in Thailand, he had 14 teeth left, and only a tenuous hold on half of those.



Hervey Bay man Malcolm Meadows, 76, had his teeth fixed in Bangkok and paid half the price for the same procedures after being quoted \$67,000 by an Australian dentist. Picture: Amanda Hodge

“I’ve had bad teeth nearly all my life and getting them fixed was top of my bucket list,” he says when we meet in the glitzy lobby of Bangkok Smile’s Sukhumvit clinic a week after his having major dental surgery involving the insertion of titanium plates and a set of temporary teeth.

Mr Meadows is happy with his decision and so is his wife, who “thought they looked good even with my face all black and blue”, he says, though the former furniture salesman cannot yet be said to be a poster child for Thai dentistry.

His temporary teeth look a bit big for his mouth and are affecting his speech, though he has been assured his permanent set – to be fitted after a few months when the plates settle – will be a perfect fit.

So far it has cost him \$28,400 and could cost half that again when he comes back in six months for his permanent teeth



Bangkok Smile dentist and owner Dr Sermsakul ‘Bob’ Wongtiraporn says many of the Australian patients he sees have serious dental problems accumulated over years that they cannot afford to have fixed in Australia. Picture: Amanda Hodge

Clinic owner Dr Sermsakul “Bob” Wongtiraporn concedes Thai dentistry is not as cheap as it used to be for Australians as the value of the baht to the Australian dollar has risen, but it is still vastly more affordable than Australia for the many middle and working-class patients who walk through his doors with serious dental problems.

“(Currency fluctuations) are out of our hands but we have kept our prices the same for the past 10 years. We can’t increase the price because people need our help,” he says as a steady stream of Western patients flow through the clinic.

Most of the Australians he treats – and his website is plastered with their testimonials – come with serious dental problems that require several visits over a few weeks.

“They’re the people who can’t afford the cost of treatment in their own country so their dental problems have compounded and are huge; dentures, dental implants and veneers,” he says.

“To really help them, we need to make sure there won’t be any additional costs for their teeth when they return home so we have to think about how we can make stronger crowns and better implants, and we have to be able to make those in a short period of time to suit a two to three-week timetable.”

Just how his patients are funding their still hugely expensive dental adventures is unclear, though if recent statistics are any guide, more than a few are dipping into their super to do so.

The latest Australian Taxation Office figures show that of \$1.4bn in superannuation drawn early on compassionate grounds in the past financial year, \$817m was for major dental work – a more than tenfold rise in seven years.

“One of the interesting things I keep hearing from practitioners is they have patients come and fill out forms at their clinics (to access their super) and then never come back,” says Matt Hopcraft, associate professor at Melbourne University’s dental school, who suspects growing numbers of Australians are taking the money and heading to overseas clinics that charge half as much.

Destination Beauty's comparison price list

- Mid face and neck lift: \$9500 in Thailand; \$35,000 in Australia
- Skin removal after massive weight loss, extended tummy tuck, arm lift and breast lift: \$24,000 in Thailand; \$55,000 in Australia
- Gastric sleeve: \$9990 Thailand, \$14,500-\$30,000 Australia
- All-on-four upper and lower teeth: \$30,000 Thailand; \$50,000 Australia
- 16 high-quality porcelain veneers: \$6500 Thailand, \$20,000-\$30,000 Australia

Source: Destination Beauty, which provides cosmetic surgery and dental procedures. These are estimates only and do not take into account personal circumstances, health insurance cover or rebates available in Australia. Prices are affected by currency changes.

It is an issue that raises twin concerns; the safety of Australians seeking major surgery over too short a time span in sometimes dubious foreign clinics, and that some Australian dental practices are actively encouraging people to dip into their super funds early to fund hyper-expensive dental work at home instead of exploring cheaper options.

“As an industry, we have allowed it to happen by not doing more to make services more affordable,” says Dr Hopcraft, who said he believes the long-term solution is to bring preventive dental care under the Medicare system (which the dental industry once stridently opposed).

In the meantime, though, “there are patients facing tough choices; they need the treatment but the costs are unaffordable”.

And so an entire industry has developed in foreign countries to cater for them.

As Asia’s medical tourism industry expands, including into the brave new world of expat elder care, an allied online concierge and booking service industry has emerged to help potential clients navigate an undeniably risky landscape.

Hong Kong-based DocDocDash, which helps clients choose and book medical services in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Turkey, says its goal is to “offer alternative quality care at affordable prices”.

Founder Xania Wong, a young Hong Kong-Canadian entrepreneur, says she has started off slowly to get to know the best providers but, even so, has booked more than 1000 medical procedures and appointments in the past six months.

She confirms Australians overwhelmingly look to Thailand for dental treatment, followed by medical and lab tests, while in Turkey most come for hair transplants.

Unlike Americans, however, who make up a third of Thailand’s three million medical tourists annually and come for everything from cardiac care to cancer treatments and orthopaedic surgery to avoid huge medical costs at home, few if any Australians will pay for surgery abroad that they can get for free at home – even if it means long wait times.

Many Australians who do seek treatment overseas still won’t readily admit to it but Ms Wong believes it won’t be long before medical tourism “becomes part of the holiday itinerary”.

Tourists to Thailand, Vietnam or Malaysia will think nothing of nipping into a dentist for a quick check-up and teeth whitening, an internationally accredited private hospital for a comprehensive health assessment, or a same-day pathology lab for a no-frills hormone balance test, she says.



The lobby of Bangkok's top private hospital Bumrungrad, one of the most popular destinations for medical tourism. Picture: Supplied

Former Danish banker Anders Olesen set up his own Bangkok Health Services three years ago as a more complete medical concierge business that not only books the surgeries for medical tourists but provides a safety net for those worried about post-hospital care.

His company offers a 24-hour post-surgery hotline, nursing staff and “complications insurance” if a client needs additional treatments within 180 days of surgery.

“That’s one of the major reasons people use us. Because they want to know that as soon as they leave the hospital, someone is there to take care of them,” says Mr Olesen, who insists the key to a successful medical tourism experience is research.

“Don’t always take the cheapest. And take the time to plan. Take three to six months for surgery so everything can be done smoothly.”

Back at the Somerset breakfast room, Queensland woman Diane Warren vows plastic surgery has seen the last of her after a painfully slow recovery from a full face, chin, eye and neck lift eight days earlier that cost her \$20,000 – still big money even if it is around a third of what it would have cost in Australia.



Before and after: Queensland woman Diane Warren travelled to Thailand in early October and spent \$20,000 on a full face, neck and eye lift in a Bangkok hospital.



Warren is happy with the outcome of her facelift in Thailand.

At 68, Warren is no stranger to cosmetic procedures – she's had breast reduction, liposuction and a tummy tuck in Australia – but the four-hour surgery she has just undergone in Bangkok has taken its toll.

Still wearing a compression bandage around her jaw line, with kaleidoscopic bruising from her eyes to her chin, she has no regrets about choosing Thailand but says people should be prepared for nurses who speak little-to-no English and a complete lack of post-surgical care once discharged from hospital.

“Now that I am starting to really see the difference, I am actually really happy with the result and so glad I went, but it is a big process,” she admits a few weeks later.

“I had a couple of girlfriends down last weekend and they were blown away by the before and after pictures. I don’t want to look 30. I just want to have smooth skin and look fresh – just for me.”

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Amanda Hodge is the Asia-Pacific correspondent for The Australian and a senior reporter with almost two decades of experience reporting on South and Southeast Asian politics and society. She has covered some of the biggest news events and stories of recent decades including the US Navy Seals raid on Osama bin Laden's Pakistan compound, the rise of India, Afghanistan war and Taliban takeover, Sri Lankan civil conflict, Myanmar coup and civil war, Thai Caves Rescue, and escalating geopolitical tension in the South China Sea. Amanda's work as an Asia specialist has been recognised with awards from the Lowy Institute, the United Nations and a Walkley award for foreign reporting. Follow Amanda on LinkedIn

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