Mexican Hospitals Aim To Attract More Americans

In these tough economic times, many Americans are struggling to pay for health care or health insurance. And hospitals in Mexico are expanding in hopes of attracting more patients from north of the border. A growing industry is now marketing medical tourism to Americans. Hospitals in Tijuana, just half an hour’s drive from San Diego, can do many medical procedures for half or a third of the cost in the U.S. NPR’s Jason Beaubien reports.

JASON BEAUBIEN: Grupo Angeles is the largest private hospital network in Latin America. Their hospital in Tijuana is a modern six-story building. Its glass lobby accented with orange looks like it could be the set for a soap opera.

Mr. CARLOS ZAVALA RUIZ (Business Director, Hospital Angeles Tijuana): This is our emergency room. We have four observation cubicles.

BEAUBIEN: Carlos Zavala Ruiz, the business director for Hospital Angeles Tijuana, says this facility opened three years ago.

Mr. ZAVALA RUIZ: All the equipment and everything is just basically brand new.

BEAUBIEN: Right now, about 50 percent of this hospital's business comes from north of the border. Americans mainly come for elective surgeries - hip and knee replacements, laser eye surgery, plastic surgery. The greatest number come for treatments for extreme obesity. Hospital Angeles does gastric bypass surgeries. They insert gastric sleeves and install lap bands. Zavala says the cost of these procedures in Tijuana is just a fraction of what they’d cost in the States. Take, for example, a lap band surgery.

Mr. ZAVALA RUIZ: I think you will find that a lap band in the United States, it's about $18,000 right now - $16,000.

BEAUBIEN: Compared to here, what is it going to cost?

Mr. ZAVALA RUIZ: $7,000.

BEAUBIEN: He says their overhead is far less than in a U.S. hospital. Wages are also far cheaper. A nurse just a few miles north in California might earn $70,000 a year. A starting nurse here earns $500 a month. Zavala says the potential for growth in treating Americans is huge. Grupo Angeles plans to open 12 more hospitals in Mexico over the next five years, much of this to cater to international clients. Miriam Gray is a nurse from Wisconsin. She’s recovering in a private room in Hospital Angeles after gastric bypass surgery.

Ms. MIRIAM GRAY (Nurse): I'd probably like to lose at least 125 pounds, which is a lot, but I'd like to.
BEAUBIEN: Gray has a body mass index of 42, which is categorized as extremely obese. After years of failed diets, she hopes gastric bypass surgery will finally help her lose weight. She flew from Wisconsin into San Diego where a driver from the hospital met her and brought her here. Gray, who doesn't speak Spanish, says the entire procedure has gone even smoother than she had expected.

Ms. GRAY: I was checked in, had my blood withdrawn and the X-ray all within about an hour. I know that that is impossible in the United States. I mean, I work in hospitals. It just doesn't happen that fast.

BEAUBIEN: Gray paid $12,000 for this operation - about a third of what she says it would have cost her back home in Wisconsin. The medical tourism industry has been around for a while. Costa Rica has marketed its hospitals to foreigners for years. Even Cuba has a bustling business selling health care procedures to Canadians and Europeans. But these arrangements have generally been a single person paying for a single procedure abroad. Now there's a movement to offer cut-rate health plans that provide traditional health care, but some big ticket benefits may only be offered outside the country.

BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina last year set up an affiliate to offer benefits abroad. In June of this year, the American Medical Association for the first time issued medical tourism guidelines. Terry White with Bridge Health International is marketing health plans to businesses in which some of the procedures are only available in, say, Thailand, Costa Rica, or Mexico. White says participation in these plans should be voluntary.

Mr. TERRY WHITE (President, Bridge Health International): The patient should not be forced to go to an international destination because, you know, their plan only offers surgery in Mexico or something like that.

BEAUBIEN: What he's offering, he says, is health care coverage that can save both consumers and employers significant amounts of money.

Mr. WHITE: This needs to be about the empowered health care consumer who's able to make choices that have an economic impact with the assurance that they're getting good quality when they go someplace.

BEAUBIEN: Unlike Carlos Zavala at Hospital Angeles in Tijuana, White sees the potential market for international health care - particularly in an economic downturn - to be huge. Jason Beaubien, NPR News.

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