

Dr Feelgood

Mixing conventional and alternative health practices, medical spas are just what the doctor ordered. Maintaining good health, and doing so in a rejuvenating environment, has never been easier. By Judy Chapman

Picture this. You wake up to a view of a pristine ocean. A nurse, who is also a qualified nutritionist, delivers your organic breakfast. In less than seven hours, you will undergo a serious operation, but first the doctors have advised you take a one-hour massage and spend some time in the spa relaxing in the water therapy area. They also recommend a hypnotherapy session to help you relax during the operation. Afterwards, you will undergo several days of post-operative services including acupuncture and organic herbal supplements to help you during the recovery process. There will be cooking and yoga classes, too, as part of your new preventive program. And you haven't even left the hospital yet.

Sounds too good to be true? It isn't. Medical tourism is now the fastest growth area in the spa community. According to Spa Finder, an international marketing and travel company, the medical spa is generally defined as "an establishment employing medical and spa professionals whose primary purpose is to provide comprehensive medical and wellness care in an environment that integrates spa services as well as conventional and complementary therapies and treatments".

It's believed that the medical spa, driven primarily by baby boomers whose higher expectations include healthy ageing and longevity, will be a model of the future of medicine. And why not? The idea of getting well in a sanctuary spa-like environment sounds

rather appealing. While popular treatments are cosmetic beauty procedures such as botox and laser rejuvenation, so too are sophisticated diagnostic therapies and complementary health and detoxification programs.

Integrative therapies

In the US, for example, anti-ageing guru Dr Andrew Weil will introduce integrative health programs at the new Miraval wellness centre set to open this year. At St Calos Medical and Spa, the first integrated Thai herbal medical spa in Asia, patients stay in luxurious accommodation and are given healthy meals and access to facilities including a fitness club and jacuzzi, sauna and steam rooms. As well as medical check-ups, they are exposed to traditional Thai herbal medicine and individualised beauty treatments, fitness programs, a massage menu, acupuncture, cosmetic surgery, dietary advice and medical treatments — all administered by an expert physician team. Certainly, mind-body guru Deepak Chopra was well ahead of the game when he employed medical doctors at the Chopra Center in California.

In Mexico, the Sanoviv Medical Institute has been described as the Ritz Carlton of hospitals. Here, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, is a stunning European-style spa offering massages, bodywork, stress management and mercury-free dentistry. It provides more than 20 diagnostic techniques including DNA testing to determine one's state of health and what

the future may hold. The institute's mission is to provide a facility where patients can learn to prevent, if not cure, ailments such as heart disease, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimers, arthritis, obesity and diabetes as well as various types of cancer.

Just the thought of healing and recuperating in one of the above environments is enough to make anyone feel well. As Sally Mathrick, ND from The North Coast Integrative Medical Centre, explains: "Studies have shown that people will recover from surgery and illness faster if the view from their window is of trees rather than a brick wall. Nature and even photographs of nature have been proven to lower blood pressure. It's natural and we know it's good for us."

Time to heal

"Better food, more compassion and loving care need to be the primary goals of our medical system rather than something that happens by chance," adds Professor Stephen P Myers, Director of the Australian Centre for Complementary Medicine Education and Research (ACCMER). He says we need to create environments where doctors have more time to spend with their patients.

Dr Pakpilai Thavisin of S Medical Spa in Thailand reports that, as stress is now believed to be the cause of more than 80 per cent of degenerative diseases, hypertension, heart attack, cardiovascular disease, stroke, allergy, lower immunity, infections and cancer, to name a few, the medical spa is ideal not just for curative treatments but also preventive health programs. Certainly, a benefit is that medical doctors often have more time to conduct a thorough assessment compared with the barely 20-minute sessions we experience here in Australia.

Better nutrition is another benefit and certainly where traditional hospitals may be failing to deliver. "The hospitals in the United States are feeding people terrible food and there are many staph infections," reports Cynthia



Getting well in a sanctuary spa-like environment is an increasingly popular option

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Spas are no longer just a luxury experience but a way to enhance wellbeing

specialist takes up time and energy. As Sharon Kolkka, General Manager of Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat in Australia, says, “Time is a precious commodity, so we are able to offer an alternative where guests can learn how better to take care of their health in all areas of their life. We are a one-stop shop to help people change their lives.” Kolkka believes it’s the combination approach that includes diagnostics, education seminars, cooking classes, fitness and integrative therapies that will ultimately bring about positive change.

International destinations

More and more people are travelling outside their country for medical spa experiences. According to travel experts, travel of the future may depend on the health offerings rather than the actual destination. Countries like Thailand, South America and India, for example, are already popular destinations for medical tourism.

“The Sanoviv Institute is located in Mexico because conventional medical treatment in the United States focuses on the drug/symptom approach and not a whole-body way of healing. If we were operating inside the United States we would be forced to act like this as well,” says Dr Tercha.

Dr Thavisin explains that Americans and Europeans travel for medical tourism as certain treatments are more affordable than at home where they need to be self-paid. S Medical Spa, for example, offers a one-day wellness check-up whereby you arrive at 9am for a blood test, cholesterol/lipid profile, liver and kidney function test, tumour marker, urine analysis, chest X-ray, ECG, abdominal ultrasound and aura test to measure your energy balance. This is followed by a half-day spa treatment plus spa cuisine lunch then a visit to the family doctor at around 6pm for the results of your check-up. All this for around US\$360.

“People often ask me three times to repeat the cost to make sure this price includes everything, as in their country, doctors’ fees can be €200 and a half-day spa can be another €200 without a lab test and investigation,” Dr Thavisin says.

There’s a flip side to travelling outside your country for medical care, though: because you won’t be covered by government or private health insurance, you pay upfront for procedures. Plus, there’s minimal follow-up care, so what happens if something goes wrong? It’s vital you check the credentials of the places and ask before your visit whether they take responsibility should something go wrong.

According to Marc Cohen, Professor of Complementary Medicine at RMIT University and President of the Integrative Medicine Association, one drawback to travelling overseas for healthcare is there’s

often no follow-up in place. He says the most crucial part of medical care is the therapeutic relationship, which requires continuity of care between patient and doctor. “Australia has some of the highest quality and most affordable healthcare in the world, so I would ask, why travel overseas when we have the best here?” He advises people to investigate what policies the destination has in place in case of complications or other misadventure.

Dr Anthony Solomon adds that standards for health professions overseas are not necessarily equivalent to those of registered health professionals here. “In Australia, continuing professional development is a requirement of ongoing registration and ensures an up-to-date healthcare workforce. This may not be the case in all overseas settings.”

He says it may be difficult for patients who are overseas to question a doctor or an alternative health practitioner about their qualifications or registration. He believes this is exemplified in the cases of patients with terminal illness who travel to overseas hospitals looking for a cure. In this case, unscrupulous practitioners can prey on desperate consumers. In addition, he highlights the issue of inter-professional communication.

“In the international setting, good communication is possible if patients carry a copy of their medical history with them to their destination. Return communication can then take place electronically, which is quick, although not necessarily secure.”

Myers agrees continuing care would be hard to get in one-off visits to destination medical spas. “In the West, this springs from the concept of the family doctor who can follow up — someone who actually knows you.” He says a relationship developed over time will allow a practitioner to look deeper than the symptoms, which will result in optimal wellbeing. “It’s like taking one layer off at a time — gracefully.”

Future trends

According to experts, spas of the future will respond to societal ills and dilemmas, including obesity, impotence, heart disease, diabetes and stress. We will see more hospitals adding spa wings or floors so patients can take treatments pre- and post-surgery. Destination resorts are starting to add sophisticated diagnostic and medical-style services to their menu. There is even the possibility that Dubai is establishing the world’s first medical spa city. Another trend to watch is the spa living concept or spadomonium (luxury urban residences with a spa and medical facility on site).

Standards and regulations should improve. As President of the Thai Spa Association, Andrew Jakka reports all medical spas in Thailand are now strictly controlled by the Royal Thai Government through the Ministry of Public Health and must be registered as a medical facility. He says foreigners will feel very comfortable utilising these spas, as all offer a professional level of therapies and most are within or adjacent to hospital facilities.

“I am confident in the medical spa future because people now live longer, so they need to keep their best shape — in body and mind — to have best performance and best quality of life,” says Dr Pakpilai. “A hospital is for someone who is already sick, but nowadays people realise they should take good care of themselves to not let themselves get sick in the first place.”

Spas are no longer seen as luxury experiences but as a way to enhance wellbeing. Imagine cutting-edge diagnostics and check-ups in heavenly destinations. The new mindset is to return home from vacation not only feeling fabulous but with newfound knowledge of how to take better care of oneself.

Judy Chapman is the author of three books on spas and wellbeing and the former Editor-in-Chief of Spa Asia magazine. For the past five years, she has been exploring the spas of the world with pilgrimages through the onsens of Japan, the Himalayas and Ayurvedic spas across India and Sri Lanka.

Why a medical spa?

Prevention is better than cure

Stress is believed to be the number one contributor to diseases such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, stroke, allergy, poor immunity, infections and cancer. A visit to a dedicated medical spa provides access to excellent preventive health programs designed to counteract the presence of stress in any lifestyle. Research conducted over the past 10 years shows that poor exercise habits, smoking, substance abuse, lack of nutrition and compliance with medical treatments all contribute to stress. The medical spa provides a one-stop shop to change and transform the way you live.

Individualised care

If you have been diagnosed with a degenerative disease or simply want to learn how to prevent the onset of illness, a reputable medical spa environment may work for you. Good ones offer individualised integrative care administered by an expert team of medical doctors and therapists. You’ll receive not only cutting-edge diagnostics but a diet, fitness and therapy program tailored specifically for you. Another benefit is that the doctors have more time to spend with patients, conduct quality diagnostics and provide individualised care.

Comprehensive diagnostics

As well as the range of cutting-edge diagnostics available at medical spas, some are starting to offer DNA analysis that will give you a scientific motivation for optimising your health. Through DNA testing, you can gauge what diseases you may be susceptible to, including cancer. These tests reportedly provide you with a blueprint that will inspire you to create an effective preventive health program for the future.

Tercha of the Sanoviv Medical Institute. She says that at Sanoviv staff aspire to a less toxic approach to healing.

Mathrick explains that providing wholesome, nourishing food may be political. “Vital health-giving foods generally require fewer chemicals and more organic, sustainable growing and processing methods. Their shelf life is generally shorter and there are less preservatives and additives used. Consequently, there is resistance from many industries that are entrenched in the traditional food production methods, making the vital health-giving foods more difficult to access for institutions on tight budgets.”

She believes we need to focus on producing foodstuffs that promote health instead of healthy profits, to really turn the sickness industry into a wellness one and for hospitals to become health houses rather than sick houses.

Integrative medical care is another significant benefit of the medical spa trend. An environment where medical doctors work alongside naturopaths, acupuncturists, nutritionists and complementary practitioners

for the purpose of enhancing our health is inspirational. “In Thailand, we offer integrative care with alternative medicine such as traditional Thai and Chinese traditional medicine herbs, acupuncture, therapeutic massage, energy medicine and treatments that connect mind, body and spirit,” says Dr Thavisin.

Dr Anthony Solomon (MBBS FRACGP), also from the North Coast Medical Centre, says the model where each practitioner is the specialist in their respective field works as the patient has the ‘therapeutic relationship’ with each one. He reports the risk of interactions and side effects of treatment is minimised because each practitioner has an understanding of the other modality. Myers adds that with complementary practitioners and medical doctors working side-by-side then medical doctors would not need to attend to everything and some of the workload can be shared with the naturopaths, resulting in better health care for the patient.

Time is another crucial factor. In our fast-paced world, travelling from the doctor to the naturopath and then across town to see a

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