

## **COSMETIC TOURISM**

In May 2024, the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care released a report on the [Safety and Quality Issues in Cosmetic Surgery](#) based on reviews of available medical literature and clinical guidelines. Specifically, the report identified cosmetic tourism as a growing industry with adverse consequences likely to be managed in Australia by Australian Plastic Surgeons.

Cosmetic tourism, where individuals travel overseas for cosmetic surgery, is gaining popularity due to factors like lower costs, shorter waiting times, and less stringent regulations overseas. However, this trend raises significant concerns about patient safety and quality of care, with reports of poor outcomes and complications on return to Australia. Below is a summary of the issues identified and current strategies used to mitigate risks.

### **Safety and quality risks**

#### *Patient Consent*

Informed consent is crucial for any medical procedure. In Australia, patients are required to consult with their surgeon before making any financial commitments for cosmetic surgery, followed by a cooling-off period. In cosmetic tourism, however, consultations often occur with non-medically trained representatives, with payment sought in advance. This lack of proper consultation and screening, compounded by potential language barriers, can lead to inadequate informed consent.

#### *Overseas Facilities*

Many overseas facilities performing cosmetic surgery may not meet the maintenance or hygiene standards expected in Australia. There are concerns about the quality and regulation of drugs and medical products used in surgery. Risks identified include the use of counterfeit or expired products.

#### *Care and Complications on return home*

Post-surgery complications are a major concern. Patients often lack access to follow-up care and legal protection once they return home to Australia. Any adverse consequences resulting from cosmetic surgery overseas are likely to be managed in Australian health services by Australian Specialist Plastic Surgeons, increasing the burden on an already stretched system.

#### *Infections*

Patients are exposed to various pathogens abroad, including rare and multi-drug-resistant bacteria, leading to infections that are hard to diagnose and treat. In addition, they may be colonised by these pathogens and be carriers for months after their return home. This increases the risk of spreading infections within Australian hospitals and communities.

#### *Venous Thromboembolism (VTE)*

Venous Thromboembolism are blood clots that can occur in the deep veins. Typically, these blood clots can form in the legs, pelvis or lungs following extensive surgery. Cosmetic tourists face compounded and elevated risks of VTE due to extensive surgeries and long-haul flights.

## **Strategies to improve safety**

### *Education*

Cosmetic tourism's appeal is offset by these significant health risks and complications, highlighting the need for better regulation and patient education. The effectiveness of public education campaigns for medical tourists can be enhanced through government-mandated resources. Education may also benefit health practitioners to increase awareness, and to help recognise and address the issues relating to cosmetic tourism.

### *Antimicrobial stewardship*

There are advocacy efforts for consistent infection control strategies, surveillance and antimicrobial stewardship to minimise over-prescription of antibiotics with the aim of reducing patient harm and antimicrobial resistance in Australia.

### *Australian Breast Device Registry (ABDR)*

This registry supports tracking and managing outcomes for breast device surgeries, including those performed abroad, promoting continuity of care. Patients can carry the ABDR data collection form overseas for completion at their surgical facility and then submit it to the ABDR upon their return. This promotes standardised data sharing to enhance safety and manage complications effectively.

### *Guidelines and practice standards for cosmetic tourism*

The Medical Board of Australia (MBA) guidelines state that cosmetic surgery procedures should only be provided by a medical practitioner who has the appropriate training, expertise and experience. National and international professional cosmetic surgery associations have also developed guidelines which largely align with regulatory bodies to protect patients seeking cosmetic surgery. In addition, some of these associations can sanction members who breach these guidelines, including suspension and expulsion from the association.

The Safety and Quality Issues in Cosmetic Surgery review acknowledges the implications of cosmetic tourism and highlights the importance of standardised practices, patient education, and comprehensive follow-up to mitigate risks associated with seeking cosmetic surgery abroad.

### Reference:

KP Health. [Safety and Quality Issues in Cosmetic Surgery: A rapid review](#). Sydney: ACSQHC; 2024.