

Second Opinions and Surgery at Distant Places from Home

When one is confronted with a serious illness and the possibility of a life transforming surgery it makes sense to hear your options from more than one person. Therefore, we always welcome additional opinions for our patients. The second opinion may offer better alternatives and the potential for better results. Hence, we realize that patients seeking second opinions may choose to have surgery by others. We will never object to patients getting a second opinion and choosing to have surgery by another surgeon.

Surgery has become a commodity that is heavily advertised by hospitals and surgeons. Centers of excellence are advertised in airplane magazines and hospitals offer hotel accommodations for patients and families who choose to have surgery away from home. This could also be acceptable if one could keep going back to that hospital for follow up care and for the care of complications. What is not acceptable to us is when patients choose to go to a remote location to have elective surgery, return home, develop a problem and then expect to delegate their care to us.

The reverse of this phenomenon is when a surgeon travels long distances to perform surgery away from home. This is called itinerant surgery and it has been regarded as unethical by surgical organizations. It is unethical for the surgeon to create a situation where the patient cannot receive continuity of care. The surgeon who did the surgery has to be responsible for managing the patient throughout the recovery from the operation.

There are many reasons why patients who have surgery at distant places may not be able to return to the surgeon who did the surgery. Sometimes the hospital has no bed available, the surgeon is travelling abroad, or the insurance plan is no longer covering visits and admissions out of network. This situation is much more common than one would imagine when listening to that second opinion.

When a surgeon offers a treatment plan at a certain facility is because he or she is confident that the surgery can be done safely and effectively on that location. Having chosen to have surgery by a different surgeon is implying that the first surgeon did not inspire enough confidence on a particular patient. It is then difficult to reconcile how a patient who did not feel confident on having a planned surgery would decide to delegate his care to the first surgeon when the problem has escalated by a surgical complication.

We are publishing our thoughts in the website so it does not come to a surprise when we recommend that patients who choose to have surgery elsewhere they must return to the same institution for follow up care.