

Western clinics not keen on loss of patients

Healthcare providers argue over quality

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West Europeans travelling to Eastern Europe to have dental work done does not raise eyebrows, but a wend towards having cosmetic surgery carried out by Hungarian, Polish and Czech surgeons is growing. And whilst West Eumpean surgeons and consumer protection groups are issuing warnings about deficiencies, the Hungarian industry's response is to quell fears by constructing high-quality clinics and wellness centres.

Károly Bonifác Friedrich is a Hungarian dentist and his patients are predominantly expats. Since November 2005 he has been working in the Wabi Beauty Centre in Sopron (western Hungary) with Vienna just 60 kilometres away. Accordingly, Wabi is fully geared towards West European patients. There are few signs in Hungarian.

That is not a problem for Friedrich: "The health of my patients is closest to my heart - irrespective of whether they are Hungarian or foreign. If patients come to me for reasons of cost, then that's all right with me." He can carry out some procedures for up to 70% less than West European dentists. An implant from the Swedish company Branemark can be fitted at Wabi for EUR 1,200 but would cost EUR 2,000 in Germany, he said.

The reasons for this difference are the lower labour and rental costs. But according to the centre's management there is no quality compromise.

"We work with the most modern technology here, with high-grade materials and with the best trained dentists who speak German, English and Italian well," said Tamás Karakai, the director of Wabi. Patient Grit Kissling backed him up: "As far as hygiene standards and the results are concerned there are no differences - only the price is lower."

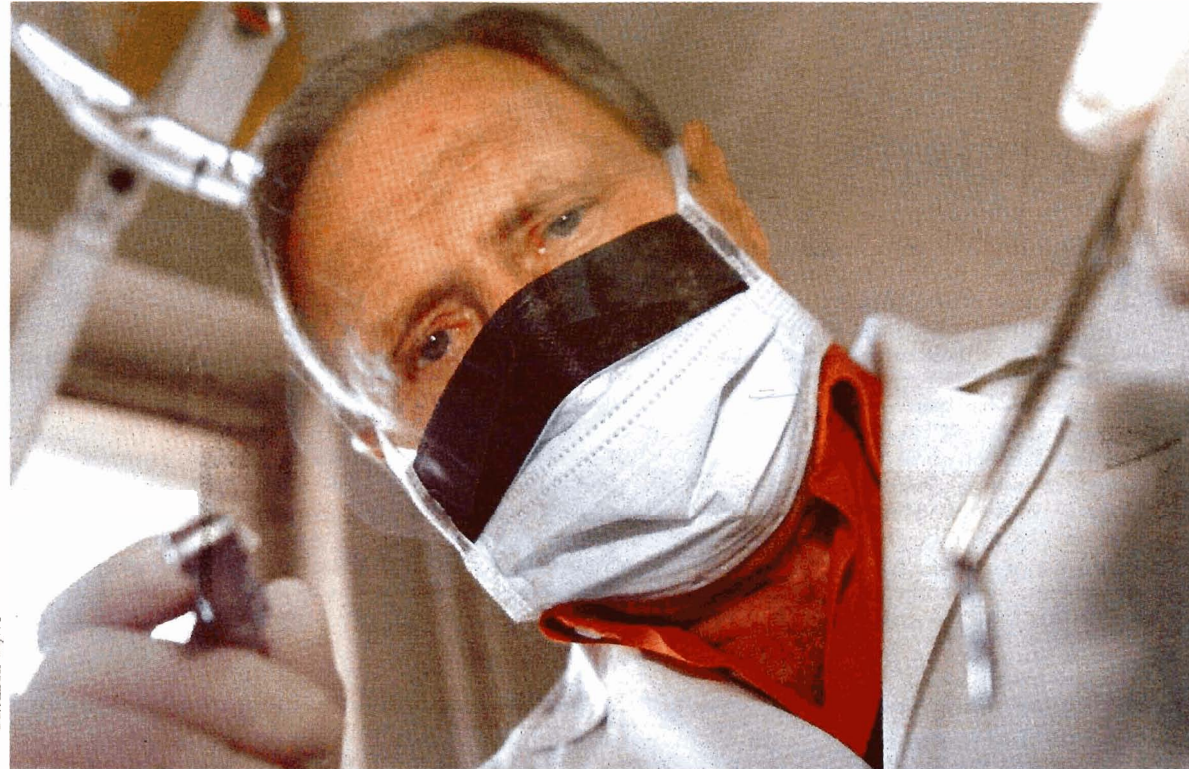
Western warnings

Roland Rose developed a business idea out of the price differential three and a half years ago. He works in Berlin and acts as an agent via an Internet portal by the name of Zahnarzt Planet (Dentist Planet) for journeys to Eastern Europe bundled with a trip to the dentist. "The German media mostly reports on the lack of quality," he complained. In fact the consumer protection magazine *Stiftung Warentest* has warned about the legal consequences which poor treatment can bring. German broadcaster ZDF put a high price on the associated costs like not being able to work plus the travel and accommodation involved. Consumer groups warn patients to inspect the facilities before treatment.

Frank Kannmann, a dentist in Mosonmagyaróvár (north-western Hungary) does not understand this.

"Of course there are black sheep as there are everywhere," Kannmann said. Zahnarzt Planet also offers wellness breaks and cosmetic surgery in Eastern Europe while the Wabi centre has two operating theatres and an intensive care unit.

So far demand at the Wabi centre has



BZT/Aaron Taylor

Westerners coming for dental work in Hungary is an everyday occurrence, but with growth in plastic surgery, western interests are sounding alarm bells

not met its potential. "We could carry out one or two operations every day but demand is currently lower than our capacity," said Karakai.

Warnings and reassurance

Rose has identified a trend: "We get around 20 inquiries a day, 40% from Austria, 25% from Germany and 10% from the United Kingdom and Ireland. The demand for plastic surgery is a lot lower than it is for dental treatment but it is growing daily."

Eastern European cosmetic surgery has its detractors too. According to the women's supplement of the Austrian

newspaper *Der Standard*: "With the cleap offers the dangers of an inadequate or even botched operation increase. That begins with the possible linguistic hurdles which can make a detailed consultation more difficult. Cosmetic surgery is often done using a production line method in Eastern Europe and little time is taken for consultations."

Stefan Handstein, the head doctor at the Clinic for Plastic, Reconstructive and Breast Surgery in Görlitz, adds: in Germany it is already difficult for patients to separate the wheat from the chaff. That is even more difficult abroad." He complains about the

cheaper-is-better mentality when it is a matter of decisions that affect the body and health. "Much more important than the cost, which by the way does not differ significantly from ours, are the consultation, the treatment methods, the material - the equipment and the opportunity for follow-up treatment and the management of complications," Handstein said.

Rose does not accept this argument: "I only act for doctors who speak German and English and who are well equipped and highly trained. We take time for preliminary checks and after-care. If there are complications, then we take care of them free of charge."