

'Medical Tourism' is the next big idea to build Jacksonville's reputation

By Drew Dixon



Ophthalmologist Arun Gulani has been attracting international patients at his Gulani Vision Institute on Jacksonville's Southside for about a decade. At times, the custom eye specialist is literally restoring eyesight to the blind with his medical procedures that are gaining reputation for corrective surgery.

Patrick Sparks, a minister who lives in Mexico and flew to Gulani's institute in February, is impressed and grateful and helps spread the word.

"I was blind in my left eye and having had a bad surgical experience in my right eye, which was operated upon in the USA, all eye surgeons I spoke to in different clinics in the USA suggested I see Dr. Gulani in Florida for my complex case," Sparks said of his "white cataract" condition that left him barely able to see his hand in front of his face. "I traveled to Jacksonville for Dr. Gulani's expertise and would have traveled anywhere else in the world if that is where he would be. He has performed nothing short

of a miracle. I can see now and am amazed."

As unconventional as his custom techniques, Gulani's business is the eye-opening example of expertise that Visit Jacksonville is promoting to attract more tourists. "Medical tourism" here includes the world-renowned Mayo Clinic and medical conventions that alone have delivered an estimated \$30 million in economic impact over the past two years.

The opportunity is so significant, Visit Jacksonville believes, it plans to spend \$203,000 selling Duval County's medical expertise through its Tourism Marketing Office. It already has sold Visit Florida, the state's tourism arm, which contributed about \$99,000 of that.

Katie Mitura, director of marketing and communication at Visit Jacksonville, said that by the time the grants were received in January, Visit Jacksonville already had started working with Market

Staging Inc. for advertising on the Internet and in medical periodicals, reaching out to medical meeting organizers.

About \$104,000 in matching local funds will be used to promote the general medical community tied with Visit Jacksonville's partners, including Mayo Clinic, University of Florida Health Proton Therapy Institute and Ackerman Cancer Center.

While those well-known institutions also have their own marketing programs, Visit Jacksonville's outreach could be a brighter spotlight for niche specialists such as Gulani

"Everything that we are doing is for the entire medical community in Jacksonville," Mitura said.

In turn, the thinking goes, the reputations earned by the likes of Gulani will help build Jacksonville's reputation.

"The biggest reason patients have been flying [international flights] to us is because even these surgeries that most doctors do, Lasik and cataract, we do it at a totally higher level where we're aiming for vision without glasses using technologies that few people in our country have at this point," Gulani said.

Using surgical processes in stages, Gulani takes a step-by-step approach to repair an eye closer to its focus, similar to adjusting a camera lens. Except that the procedures are for those who are considered "non-candidates" — people who do not qualify for treatment for regular Lasik surgery.

Gulani provides custom surgery for those patients by addressing "microsegments" — small areas in the cornea. Using a surgical glue recently approved by the Food and Drug Administration, the eyesight is restored to 20/20 vision with no stitches.

MEDICAL TRAVELERS SPEND MORE

The medical field has become increasingly important to the Jacksonville area's economy. Hotels, for instance, have been built near the Mayo Clinic off San Pablo Road in the Intracoastal West area, expecting a flow of patients who may be here for weeks or even months.

Visit Jacksonville estimates medical tourism contributes \$23 million a year to the local economy. Medical meetings and conventions brought about \$30 million in economic impact in 2013 and 2014, Mitura said. Those figures are calculated based upon the number of attendees and average hotel room rate they pay.

"We started working in 2008 on medical tourism because we felt it was a big driver of visitors to the city," Mitura said, adding that such tourism is lucrative. "Medical tourism visitors spend three to 10 times more than the normal visitor who is coming to this state. We know this can be very big business to our city."

With one of the three prestigious Mayo clinics in the U.S., Jacksonville has become an international destination.

“Mayo Clinic treats patients from all over the world,” Mayo Clinic CEO Gianrico Farrugia said. “Many of these patients have complex health issues and are in need of our highly specialized care in areas such as cancer, neurology, and cardiology.”

Farrugia said the Visit Jacksonville campaign can only help.

“Any effort to attract more people and patients to the region is great for patients, the local economy and all medical centers,” he said.

Mitura said Visit Jacksonville is aware of the delicate nature of marketing medical tourism — people are coming here with afflictions and complicated conditions. But she said the agency is careful to conduct the campaigns in a sensitive manner.

“We are looking to provide information and provide these amazing doctors for people who are looking for it,” Mitura said. “We’re not looking to exploit and steal people away from another place, we just want to make them aware.”

Gulani said the reputation of the Jacksonville medical community has been relying mainly on word of mouth.

“Every time patients fly to me for all of these unique and advanced techniques it shows that people today are willing to travel for the best surgeon and the best technology, place doesn’t matter,” Gulani said. “Talking about medical tourism, Jacksonville is a fertile ground maybe to make it a destination for the world.

“We have not benefited as much as people flying to Jacksonville and finding us. But they’re actually flying to us and that has become its own system. I can see it [medical reputation] helping Jacksonville rather than Jacksonville at present helping us.”

But the marketing program that is underway offers encouragement to the medical community, Gulani said.

“I think it’s excellent,” Gulani said. “All of us, in a way, are doing this on our own. But if there is a central body that’s tying all these things together, I think Jacksonville has an amazing future.”