

JACKSONVILLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Why medical tourism is booming in Florida

Florida might be known for Disney World and South Beach, but it's also increasingly a go-to destination for world-class health care. Northeast Florida, in particular, has carved out a niche in medical tourism, the term used to describe visitors who travel outside their city, state or country for medical treatment or a procedure and stay more than a day, sometimes even for months at a time.

With such facilities as the Mayo Clinic of Florida, the University of Florida Health Proton Therapy Institute, Ackerman Cancer Center and Wolfson Children's Hospital, the Jacksonville region is home to some top-notch providers and specialists, and that draws patients from other parts of Florida, other states and even other countries. It also translates into some serious economic investment — dollars generated from hotel stays, dining, entertainment and tourism.

Dr. Arun Gulani, a Jacksonville ophthalmologist specializing in advanced eye surgeries at his Gulani Vision Institute, regularly treats a dozen patients from across the globe each month. Many find him during an Internet search of high-tech procedures to correct vision, typically cases that other eye doctors are not equipped to take on.

"I think it is reflective of the times we live in — patients who want the best service and they're willing to travel for it," Gulani said.

Some procedures he does require extended stays and/or multiple visits, something he said his patients and their families don't seem to mind.



“They look at it as a kind of vacation,” Gulani said.

And if they enjoy themselves here, they might return or tell others what Jacksonville has to offer. That’s why medical tourism marketing efforts are being ramped up.

Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Jacksonville, has sponsored a bill in the state Legislature that would further Florida’s reputation for medical tourism.

“It’s a niche market that’s really been underexplored,” Bean told the Business Journal. “We’ve done a phenomenal job of getting visitors to our state, but a medical tourist is like a regular tourist on steroids — they spend five to 10 times as much because they’re here longer.”

The proposed bill would promote the qualifications, scope of services and specialized expertise of medical practitioners and health providers across the state, as well as medical-related conferences and training and business opportunities that can attract more investment in the industry. The bill also seeks to use \$1.5 million in state funding to establish a matching grant program for local and regional economic development organizations that have medical tourism marketing programs.

UF Health’s Proton Therapy Institute in Jacksonville has already seen the benefits of such grants pay off.

The institute received a \$30,000 grant (which required a match) last year, a portion of which it has used to hold symposiums on proton therapy, which is an alternative to chemotherapy for treating some forms of cancer.

“Promoting international business is an area that we’ve really embraced,” said

Stuart Klein, executive director of the institute.

The facility typically sees a minimum of 100 patients a day, many of them from outside the region or the country, particularly Europe.

“Now we’re really trying to target the Asian population,” said Klein, adding that the institute had a symposium planned for China this June.

Medical tourism and meetings generate around \$53 million in local economic impact, according to Visit Jacksonville, with about \$30 million of that coming from conventions and other gatherings.

“I think the more we can get the word out, the better,” Klein said. “It’s good for us, for the city and the state.”