

The Adventure Continues: Dentistry in Tijuana

-- Robert Yoshioka

In this election year, with over 40 million Americans without any health insurance, it is more important than ever to seek affordable and reliable alternatives to maintain our health to the best of our ability. Quality dental care ranks among the most needed, and least well-funded of health services, yet for many of us in California, a viable and easily accessible alternative is available in Mexico.

Dentistry in Tijuana!

What A Concept!

But, like so much else, Americans considering the possibility of obtaining dental work in Mexico must first overcome their own biases, prejudices, and fears. In response to a previous article that detailed the steps necessary for Americans to purchase their prescription medications from pharmacies in Tijuana, this reporter set out to research Dentistry in Tijuana and to report the results of this quest.

Oftentimes what drives consumers to seek out alternative markets are the costs associated with a procedure. In this day and age, the cost of quality dentistry here in the USA is steep to unaffordable for the average uninsured individual. Extensive corrective and reconstructive dentistry can run into the thousands of dollars here at home, BUT can be had for significantly less in Mexico.

For starters, I would invite you to go online and visit the following websites:

<http://starbulletin.com/97/05/02/business/story3.html>

From As Far Away As Hawaii

<http://www.peoplesguide.com>

The People's Guide to Mexico. An Underground Compendium of Interesting Facts and FAQ's

<http://www.search.starware.com>

(listing of Mexican dentists with web pages)

Like so many things these days, my quest for a reputable and reliable dentist in Tijuana began on the Internet, and unlike in the old days, it was only a matter of a few keystrokes before Google provided me with an embarrassment of riches!

Not only were dentists in Tijuana listed, but more importantly, individuals from around the country who had availed themselves of dental services in Mexico were represented as well. Travel guides, both traditional and underground, were cited, and many people weighed in on their perceptions of the pros and cons of having dental work done in Mexico.

An analysis of most of these different sites showed individuals to be either strongly in favor of getting dental work done in Mexico, or individuals who were strongly opposed to having dental work performed in Mexico. Another complicating factor standing in the way of making reasonable and rational decisions seemed to be the attitude of practicing American dentists and hygienists.

Most American dentists and hygienists are skeptical, to say the least, when asked about the level of dental care in Mexico, and their arguments are strongly reminiscent of the arguments brought forth by pharmacists when asked for reasons NOT to purchase prescription medications in Canada (see *CPFA News*, Spring, 2004, pp 10-11).

Most of us don't give matters of training, credentialing or hygiene a second thought when making an appointment to see a dentist in our own neighborhoods, but when contemplating dental care in a Second World country like Mexico, things we take for granted at home loom large, and rightly so. Common perceptions of towns "south of the border," Tijuana included, paint an unsavory and decidedly unhygienic picture.

Having said that, however, I am convinced that by doing one's homework via the Internet, over the phone, by snail mail and/or in person, it is not difficult to find a highly trained, sensitive, English speaking dentist who will be able to provide superior dental services at a VERY MODEST cost.

Therefore, in order to put one's mind at ease, one needs to be prepared to ask (and get answers to) a number of critical questions when interviewing a prospective dentist in Tijuana (or any other part of Mexico, for that matter). Remember, always speak respectfully, and be careful not to take an adversarial or belligerent tone. Be sure to record your answers as they are given, and observe common courtesy at all times; after all, the dentists you will be interviewing are all highly trained professionals deserving of your respect.

1. Do you speak English? An obvious question, but absolutely necessary, given our essentially mono-lingual country! Your health professional's ability to communicate effectively in standard/ colloquial English is critical when you are going to be discussing diagnosis and the procedures upon which your treatment plan is to be based. Unless you wish to have an interpreter with you at every stage, your dentist's ability to speak English is of primary importance, and hence the first question you must ask.

2. How long have you been in practice? As in the US, the answer to this question will probably range from a few years to decades. Take note of the answer and move on to the next question.

3. Where were you trained? Many dentists in Mexico received their initial training in Mexican dental schools. Initially, their training is lengthy and more "hands-on" than their American counterparts with an emphasis on various aspects of general dentistry. Mexican certification is similar to certification here in the US, and in addition, many Mexican dentists avail themselves of advanced continuing education training in clinics in the US. They should be forthcoming in sharing their relevant diplomas, certificates and licenses.

4. Are you a member of any professional associations in your field? See question 3 above.

5. Time permitting, is the dentist willing to provide you with the names and contact information from previous patients who would be willing to recommend his/her services for the procedures you are contemplating? Contacting several of these references is both necessary and potentially enlightening. Do not skip this step in the selection process.

6. What kinds of diagnostic procedures will the dentist be using? When using x-rays, does the dentist observe current OSHA standards for patient shielding? Is the x-ray equipment current and does it use the least amount of radiation when imaging?

7. What kind of anesthesia or pain medication does the dentist routinely employ? You should be ready to tell the dentist if you have any allergies to the anesthesia or pain medication so that an accommodation can be made.

8. Does the dentist utilize one time use (disposable) implements whenever possible, and how are the multiple use instruments sterilized (autoclaved)? Again, do these procedures adhere to OSHA standards?

9. What kind of water does the dentist use for irrigation, rinsing and general oral use? Distilled, bottled, purified or treated water would all satisfy patient concerns. Some dentists even go so far as to import bottled water from the US. Prudence would dictate avoiding dentists who use plain untreated tap water from the municipal water system to handle dental irrigation needs.

10. Given what you can tell the dentist about your condition at the time of your initial consultation, what is his best estimate as to the number of visits that will be needed in order to complete the work? According to some dentists, approximately 80% of patients' work can be completed in one day if the patient can be scheduled for an initial examination early in the day, returning in the late afternoon for final adjustments/fitting, with the remaining patients typically requiring between 3 and 4 visits.

With computers and scanners, it is possible to contact a dentist, scan and transmit your x-rays, and receive a response to your questions via email within a few days, thus streamlining your treatment. Often a followup telephone call is all that is necessary in order to make your appointment and settle on the price for your procedure and the method of payment.

Many clinics will arrange accommodations for multi day procedures. This is particularly true for clinics and dentists who specialize in treating American patients. Again, use the Internet to sort through dentists and dental clinics that meet your needs. Many clinics list prices for various procedures; others will provide you with a quote upon reviewing your particulars. Check out the following website:

<http://www.dentistasdetijuana.com/generaldentist.html>

11. Where does the dentist or clinic purchase their dental materials? Ironically, the best quality dental materials are from the US or Germany. Many dentists purchase their supplies from vendors in the US for use in Mexico, passing on the savings to their patients.

12. What dental lab does the dentist use to fabricate his work? Many dentist own their own dental laboratories, thereby ensuring quality control over the work. Ideally, the dental laboratory will be in close proximity to the clinic or dental facility.

THE COST OF DENTISTRY: US vs. MEXICO

The old adage, “you get what you pay for,” does not necessarily hold up when it comes to comparing the price of high quality dentistry in the US and in Mexico. Factoring in price and quality, dental care in Mexico certainly has a significant edge over dental care in the US. When negotiating prices, remember that you are dealing with highly trained and educated medical professionals, and so, while some bargaining is expected, rudeness is neither welcomed or appreciated.

By searching for qualified dentists on the Internet, you will be able to get a feeling for prices that Mexican dentists charge for their services. If the dentist you contact offers his/her services for a reasonable fee, and if you have done your homework, you should feel comfortable having work done.

Many Mexican dentists will accept dental plans, and this should be thoroughly explored when negotiating their fee-for-service. It is often the case that the plan payment, less your deductible, will cover the total cost of your procedure. Many Mexican dentists retain billing services in the US in order to facilitate payment by various dental plans.

Therefore, during your preliminary investigation, you need to tell the dentist if you have dental insurance and let him know the particulars of your coverage, including your financial outlay as well as your deductible.

A CASE STUDY: DRs. TORRES Y MARTINEZ - PACIFIC DENTAL

In my search for highly trained and professional dentists, I was fortunate to come across Pacific Dental - a self-contained full service dental clinic located within walking distance of the Ave. Revolucion - one of the main tourist shopping streets in Tijuana, and only minutes from the border by taxi.

Pacific Dental is situated on the second floor on an unimposing building on a side street, the exterior of which has seen better days. Staffed by Drs. Torres and Martinez and a staff of English speaking associates, Pacific Dental maintains its own laboratory, adjacent to the clinic, run by Dr. Torres' father, a retired dentist.

Drs. Torres and Martinez offer dental services covering general, prosthetic, and cosmetic dentistry and are both trained in Mexico and in the US.. They are both members of American Dental Association and are also members of the Hispanic Dental Association of California. Both have completed specialty certification courses in the US. They are highly skilled and friendly, as well as honest and hard-working. Their professional manner and mastery of colloquial English put patients immediately at ease. Needless to say, their practice is geared to serving the needs of Americans who come to Tijuana seeking high quality, moderately priced dentistry, and their patient profile confirms their marketing prowess.

According to Dr. Torres, 98+% of Pacific Dental's patients are from the US, with 60% coming as referrals from other patients. As a sign of the times 30% of their patient load comes to the clinic via the Internet, 5% come through traditional advertising and outreach, and another 5% are walk-ins.

Given the scope and nature of the work the Drs. Martinez and Torres undertake, fully 80% of their patients are able complete their work in one day. Dr. Torres noted that the one day completion is possible for even moderately complicated cases because these patients are scheduled for their initial appointment first thing in the morning, with the final work being done in the afternoon.

This rapid turnaround is only possible because Pacific Dental maintains its own dental laboratory on the premises, so that all the work is done in-house, rapidly and professionally. If, upon diagnosis, it is clear that the presenting problems are of such complexity as to require more than one visit, Pacific Dental will make referrals. Only 20% of patients require multiple visits, according to Dr. Torres.

Pacific Dental purchases most of its raw materials from firms in either the US or Germany and employs state-of-the-art laser imaging technology to map tooth implants and have them fabricated in Sweden. Their business embraces technology that is global in scope.

Unlike some cutthroat establishments in Tijuana, where price is touted over quality, Pacific Dental's normal and customary fee-for-services normally falls in the mid-range of prices. The ambiance of the office is professional and welcoming and each patient is given as much attention as is necessary. To that end, neither Dr. Torres or Dr. Martinez sees more than an average of 3-4 patients per day. While researching this article I came across the following reference to Dentistry in Tijuana written by a former patient named Roger Williams. Point your browser to the following link and read about what Roger has to say about Dr. T!

<http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2003/12/20/121018/65>

I gather that his experience with Dr. Torres was more-or-less typical of patients needing major dental work, and should be reviewed before deciding to go to Mexico for any dental work. While his article was written in 2003, his comments are germane and helpful when deciding on a dental clinic in Tijuana.

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To answer my own question: YES. I would not hesitate to avail myself of quality dental work in Tijuana, Mexico, or in any other border town, for that matter, as long as I took the time to research and find answers to the twelve questions I posed earlier in this article.

I am convinced that if one becomes a knowledgeable consumer of dental services, then the trip to the border for the careful work done by dentists like Drs. Torres and Martinez will yield handsome savings and a bright smile from even the most initially skeptical potential patients.

So, go ahead -- "Open Wide, This Won't Hurt A Bit!"