

DENTAL COSTS: Touching a nerve ...

Why we're sick to the teeth of pricey treatment

WHEN actress and drama teacher Sinead Monaghan was told she needed a root canal, two wisdom teeth extractions and six crowns, she didn't hesitate.

On being quoted €850 for the root canal and around €1,200 each for the crowns by a dentist in Dublin, the 29-year-old immediately decided to look elsewhere.

Her mother Phyllis had travelled to Budapest previously to get work done on her teeth, and, recalls Sinead, had been very happy with the results.

"She found them very good. Her teeth were perfect. Mum advised me to check out the clinic where she had been treated."

Sinead contacted the Irish agency which handled the bookings — dentalhungary.ie, based in Dublin. The agency organised an X-ray of her teeth, she booked her flights, and, accompanied by her mother, Sinead travelled to Budapest last year.

"I got the two wisdom teeth extracted, the root canal treatment, the six crowns and a full clean — in all the treatment cost around €3,500.

"The flights were quite cheap because we flew off-peak; I think it was under €300 return.

"Even with the flights it all cost far less than what I would have paid in Dublin — I estimate it would



With the cost of dental work rising and the removal of PRSI subsidies, more people are looking for better value abroad and in the North, writes **Áilín Quinlan**

have cost about €10,000 here and that's a big difference."

Sinead found the clinic in Hungary "brilliant; very professional, very quick and very gentle and considerate".

"I've recommended it to a number of people since — there are a lot of actors out there who want the perfect smile, and nice teeth.

"An actor friend of mine went over since, and although she didn't get as much work done as I had, she saved a lot of money and was

very happy — I'd strongly recommend that other people check it out as an option."

Sinead is one of a growing number of people choosing to seek dental treatment outside the Republic of Ireland, where, according to a recent report by the National Consumer Agency, nearly 70% of dentists don't even display their prices.

Some patients claim they can get the same dental treatment abroad for anything between a half and two-thirds of the price they would pay here.

When Patricia Doyle, a 55-year-old factory worker from Carlow decided to get some work done on her front teeth, she didn't even bother checking out the local dentists.

"The last time I went to a dentist in this area was about four years ago. I just find them very expensive for even basic things like fillings.

For example, a friend of mine recently paid €100 for a tooth extraction in Carlow, and I got the same job done in the north for £40 (about €48)."

Last December, Patricia decided the fillings on her front teeth had become discoloured and unattractive.

"I did some internet research on prices both in the North and in Hungary. One day I saw someone on the television talking about a surgery in Banbridge called Advance Dental Care and their prices seemed very reasonable.

"If I'd gone to Hungary I would really have needed someone to go with me, so I went to the North.

"My initial consultation was €50 (about €60) which included eight X-rays on the day. The consultation took about 40 minutes.

"The dentist advised me that I needed seven crowns on my front teeth and quoted £400 (€480) each or about £2,800 (about €3,300).

"My sister had had one crown done by a dentist in Co Carlow and it cost her €700, which meant that if she had had to get seven done like me it would have cost her about €5,000.

"I was very pleased with the treatment — I saved just under €2,000 and I was very glad that I did it.

"I'd definitely recommend that other people check out the prices in the North — because now that the Government has cut the PRSI

support on dental treatment here, Irish dentists are more expensive than ever."

But what if something goes wrong?

"Our experience is that a lot of people who go abroad don't always have happy outcomes," says Fintan Hourihan, chief executive of the Irish Dental Association (IDA).

He points to a survey published by the IDA in May which indicated that in the past 12 months 6,000 people who travelled abroad for treatment had to receive corrective treatment on their return to Ireland.

The survey also found that 75% of Irish dentists said they'd had to provide treatment to patients in those circumstances.

"People need to look at all the issues and not just at cost when selecting treatment abroad," he says.

If you are unhappy with your treatment abroad, for example, in Hungary, he says, you must bring it to the attention of the regulatory authorities there, "which makes following up a complaint very expensive".

However, David O'Flynn, registrar of the Dental Council says a large number of people who go abroad for dental treatment are happy with the work. If there is a complaint however, he confirms, it must go to that country's regulatory body.

"We are issuing guidelines to the public on the issue of dental tourism later this year," he says. "What we find is that a large number of people who go abroad for dental treatment get safe and good treatment and when they come back there are no major issues.

"A dentist practising abroad does not have to register with the Dental Council even if they are treating Irish patients.

"Some dental operations abroad are regulated by the Dental Council here and this means we can check their registration status.

"In Europe the regulatory regime is based on the country you are practising in rather than on the nationality of the patients you are treating."

However, Davor Mekterovic, who set up Dental Hungary, an Irish-based agency providing access to the award-winning Implant Centre dental clinic in Budapest, says his clients get excellent value for money, and are usually very pleased with their



Sinead Monaghan: Estimates her dental treatment in Budapest cost less than half of what she would have paid in Ireland.

treatment.

Mekterovic established his agency after being quoted €950 for one crown by an Irish dentist. "I thought it was excessive," says the 42-year-old Sarajevo who has lived in Ireland for almost 20 years.

"I researched my options and

treatment abroad and got in touch with a few different clinics and opted for treatment in a clinic in Budapest" — the clinic to which he now refers up to 300 people a year.

He found the treatment to be up to 70% cheaper than Ireland, he says, and described it as "excellent".

"There was no compromise on

quality," he says, adding that the lower prices mirror the lower cost of living and overheads in Budapest.

"Depending on the amount of work you need it can be extremely good value," he says, adding that on average his clients save between 60% and 70% on fees.

The majority of his clients have been very happy with the treatment they receive, he says.

If there are problems, and the fault is found to be related to the actual treatment, and the clinic guarantee is still in place, says Mekterovic, the work is rectified without charge though the patient must pay for their flight and accommodation.

"Patients are very pleased with the efficiency of the service and the expertise and the cleanliness — they get treatment-related transfers and generally they are very happy. We have referred people from all over Ireland from their 20s to their 80s," he says, adding that the clinic's dentists are registered with the Dental Council of Ireland and the



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— **Chief Executive Fintan Hourihan, Irish Dental Association**

General Dental Council in Britain.

"Before deciding to go with a treatment at home or abroad, do the proper research, check the surgeon's qualifications and experience and see if they are registered with the Dental Council and also ask for

references from people who already had the treatment," he advises.

Many people from the Republic are also flocking to the North for dental treatment.

About two years ago, dentist Chris Sands, a partner in Advance Dental Care in Banbridge noticed

that out of every 10 new patients, three or four were coming from the South. Now that figure has risen to seven out of 10, he says.

"We never advertised in the South — they were all word-of-mouth referrals," he says, adding that over the past six months there has been a definite surge of calls from the Republic requesting quotes for particular treatments.

"We also get a lot of emails from parts of the Republic requesting quotes. We've noticed a lot more people ringing up saying they had heard we were cheaper in the North and asking for quotes.

"They're usually very pleased with the quotes — for example, our patients tell us that they are being quoted up to €800 for a crown in the Republic.

"Our rates run between £350 (€426) and £420 (€511). The general response from southern patients is that our prices are around half what their own



“... Patients say they're being quoted up to €800 for a crown in the Republic ... Our rates here, over the border, run between €426 and €511 ...”

— **Chris Sands, dentist, Advance Dental Care**

dentist quoted."

Prospective patients, he adds, sometimes say they've been warned that lower prices may mean below-par treatment.

"We make it clear that the quality of our work is something we pride ourselves on. We both have excellent post-graduate qualifications.

"We are aiming to be one of the top practices in the North — I am currently doing a diploma in implant dentistry with the Royal College of Surgeons which would be considered the gold standard course, while my partner Adrian Steward has a diploma in restorative dentistry from the Royal College of Surgeons — this is one of the top qualifications available.

"People come from all over the Republic; Cork, Kildare, Wicklow, Wexford etc. People come to us for everything from complex restorative work to root canal treatment. We display our prices openly on the website and

in our surgery and we've been charging these prices for ages."

However, he emphasises, it's important to point out that prices in the South are higher because overhead and running costs are higher — nursing and reception staff in the Republic would be on higher wages than those in the North, he says, which must be taken into consideration.

"It's very hard to compare like with like."

However, says Fintan Hourihan, although the IDA "believes in and encourages" the display of price lists, the association believes it is only possible to give a price range. "It's not quite as simple as giving a single rate because that's not possible until after the examination — it would depend on the complexity of the operation."

There is a significant variation in fees in the Republic, he says, which proves the existence of competition.

"If all the fees were the same, dentists would be accused of price-fixing," he says.