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Irish dental tourists fly to Budapest

by Scott Millar

GOT a toothache? Fancy a holiday? Irish dental patients are discovering it is possible to satisfy both needs at the same time — and still save money.

They are travelling to Budapest in Hungary for cut-price dental treatment. More than 30 patients have made the 1,000-mile trip, with some treatments costing less than 25% of the Irish price.

A crown in Ireland costs around €950, compared to €265 at one clinic in Budapest.

Root canal fillings cost €220 on average in Ireland and €75 in the Hungarian capital.

This means a clear saving for Irish patients even factoring in the cost of air fares and accommodation.

But Irish dentists insist that, although the work may be described similarly, the treatments are not the same and so the costs cannot be compared. Attila Knott, a dental technician with the [Kreativ Clinic in Budapest](#), said: “We have had Irish patients coming sporadically to our clinic for the last couple of years but, since we started actively seeking foreign patients, more are coming.

“We also get patients from Denmark, Holland, Switzerland, Britain and America.

Dental costs in these countries are unjustifiably high. Many people just could not afford treatment in their home countries.

“We have found that Irish and British people often have severe dental problems. The dentists call operations with these patients ‘the battle of Stalingrad’.”

Budapest has had a reputation for good health clinics since it was founded as a spa town by the Romans. The country’s health system was run on a non-profit making basis during communism. Once state-supported, [Hungarian dentists](#) are only just coming to terms with the money that can be made in a free market system.

Irish people in need of dental care have already shown they are prepared to travel for cheaper treatment. Dentists in Northern Ireland say customers from the republic make up about a fifth of their customer base, with a noticeable increase in the last year.

But Donal Atkins of the Irish Dental Association, said: “It is impossible to compare accurately and fairly costs and fees between different economies — be it for dental treatment or any other service. The IDA has consistently advised patients to ensure that, when making comparisons, they are made in the context of like with like.”

The association says crowns vary considerably, but on average they require more than two hours in the dentist’s chair, spread over a number of visits. “Dental surgeons simply cannot achieve a viable crown in 30 minutes,”

Atkins said. Brid Byrne, from Kildare, who went to Budapest last October said she saved more than €10,000. “The treatment was carried out over a 10-day period and, since our return, Irish dentists have inspected the work and said it was of the highest quality,” she said.

In a warning to such Irish dental tourists, however, the IDA points out that a recent study of dental operations in Britain found nine out of 10 root fillings failed to meet European standards. These standards will only come into practice in Hungary after May 1 when the country joins the EU. The report stated that “poor quality work means patients are more likely to get further tooth decay, unnecessary pain, incur extra costs and need work redone years earlier than necessary”.

Mary Harney, the enterprise minister, is planning to make Irish dentists display price lists of their treatments outside surgeries. The minister hopes this will result in standardisation of dental treatment prices around the country.