

Barton puts emphasis on destination medicine

By Kathryn Reed

Traveling to receive medical treatment. More people are doing it every year and Barton Health wants to tap into that market in a more significant way.

Three representatives from the South Shore health care conglomerate recently attended the sixth annual World Medical Tourism and Global Healthcare Congress in Las Vegas.

More than 2,000 people were at the conference. The 200 exhibitors represented locales from around the world.

Barton sent gynecologist John Missanelli; Chris Proctor, director of Tahoe Center for Orthopedics; and Monica Sciuto, director of public relations and marketing. This is the first time anyone from Barton has attended one of the conventions. This is also the first year Barton has belonged to the association.



Barton Health wants to attract patients from outside the Lake Tahoe Basin. Photo/LTN

“With the large number of travelers to our area, we have an

opportunity to share with them the incredible team we have and serve them well should they have a medical need. We already have a destination program for orthopedics where we have many traveling from out of the area for our care," Sciuto told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It is prudent for us to continue to provide a program that serves their needs as well as our locals' needs. Both will benefit from the improvements we make."

Barton has a contract with a travel concierge to work with people who are coming from outside the area for medical care. The service is free. It includes booking flights, shuttles from the airport and hotel reservations.

"This service is also used by patients who were initially tourists and find themselves staying in Tahoe for unforeseen medical care," Sciuto said.

Orthopedic care is the No. 1 service Barton is pushing. Second is the Da Vinci surgery service.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website says, "Medical tourism is a worldwide, multibillion-dollar phenomenon that is expected to grow substantially in the next five to 10 years. However, little reliable epidemiologic data on medical tourism exist. Studies using different definitions and methods have estimated there are 60,000–750,000 medical tourists annually from around the world."

But not everyone agrees that medical tourism is growing. "Market size, market share and market strategy: Three myths of medical tourism" will be published in 2014 by Policy Press at the University of Bristol in the journal *Policy & Politics*.

The *International Medical Travel Journal* said of the research, "They describe three myths of medical tourism: the rise and rise of medical tourism; enormous global market opportunities; and that national governments have a role to play in stimulating the medical tourism sector through high-tech investment. The researchers say these three widely held

assumptions cannot be backed up with hard evidence but are encouraged by interested parties such as associations, healthcare providers, and intermediaries between providers and patients.”

Many of the locations considering themselves medical destinations are places people would want to vacation – such as Thailand, Argentina and Costa Rica.

“Patients have a choice on where they go for their health care. Providers must compete to provide the best care to attract patients. Best care, in our vision, includes high quality care, exceptional patient experience, best outcomes, proactive follow-up and convenience,” Sciuto said. “There are a lot of international hospitals going after the American patient. They say they provide the newest facilities, the best doctors and comparable procedures. There is a big concern by patients, employers and insurers about how these facilities are measured, how a patient follows up if there is an issue with their care and coordination with the patient’s primary care provider back home. It is important for us to consider the concerns of patients and address these same issues locally and with our destination patients.”

To fill the beds with people from out of town Barton has been investing in its infrastructure. This includes upgrading and remodeling patient rooms at the hospital, buying the latest MRI and CT scanners, and improving doctors’ offices and the emergency room.

Creating a personalized experience for patients is one way Barton wants to set itself apart from other health care providers. Patient satisfaction is an ever-increasing priority.

“We do not believe that we will receive a significant return on investment from this program. Our hope is that by providing the best service to our community and its visitors that we

will create a reputation that will sustain a healthy amount of patients to our health system,” Sciuto said. “By consistently investing in our services, we stay ahead of the curve to provide the best care to our patients and continue the loyalty that we have created. Word of mouth has provided us our best marketing.”