

Russia Gave Me a Hernia but Saved My Life

By [Marc Hackel](#)

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This past summer, I awoke one morning and found something tubular sticking from my belly button. I have been in Moscow for 13 years and eat my fill of Russian dumplings as well as greasy cheeseburgers. However, I had eaten lightly the night before, and could not fathom what this thing was. I tried sticking it back in, but my newfound appendage firmly refused to be squirreled away back into its burrow.

At the time, I was in between jobs, so I had no choice but to go to the local state-run clinic. The internal medicine doctor referred me to the surgeon. I went back to him a few days later and he told me I had a hernia. I was shocked because I thought that those were only south of the belt line, not in the belly button. I also thought that you had to lift a couch or refrigerator to get a hernia. I didn't know you could wake up, roll over and there it is.

The local surgeon referred me to the regional surgeon, and then I was in for a surprise. Both of them did nothing but look at me and lightly poke me, but the regional doctor said: "You

should have called the ambulance and come here the very day it occurred. You just got lucky that it is a fatty tumor sticking out and not an internal organ."

I broke into a cold sweat. He then told me to get a bunch of tests done, saying that I needed to be operated on but "not tomorrow."

So I had to go to my local clinic several times and then another medical center to get a tiny camera pushed down my throat. Then I had to go to the regional clinic to see the head surgeon. There, I met Vladimir, the head surgeon, who told me when I would need to come back. It was Thursday, and I needed to come back on Wednesday, July 3. I realized that my dreams of drinking cocktails and eating quesadillas on July 4, U.S. Independence Day, had just been abruptly shattered.

I only had one expense, and that was to buy a synthetic mesh patch and threads for the surgeon. My wife called up and asked why we had to pay 5,000 rubles for those, but they explained that those simply were not covered by state insurance, which I had. The alternative was that they would just sew the skin together without them.

Vladimir himself operated on me. He was about 55, no-nonsense, and talented. He deftly worked his magic on me. One of the two students watching me helped sew me up. We joked during the operation. The guy who sewed me up had vacationed in New York and Ocean City, Maryland.

The hospital food was plain but good and served in huge portions. The downstairs entrance was old, but the wing inside was newly renovated. Everyone was extremely friendly. I gave Vladimir a bottle of rum and chocolates as a thank-you gift.

The same doctors who work in private clinics often work in state-run clinics as well. A good, professional doctor cannot cut an incision well in a private clinic and do a shoddy job cutting the same incision in a state-run clinic. Sure, the process is longer in state-run clinics, the walls are crumbling, there is more bureaucracy and the nurses are not all young and pretty. But they perform the same work.

In private clinics, the doctors are sometimes young prima donnas, whereas experienced doctors are to be found in state-run clinics. I'll take Vladimir any day of the week.

Marc Hackel, a U.S. expat living in Moscow, works as a business development manager.

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