

Through the keyhole

Health tourists from all over the world visit Brussels' renowned obesity surgery clinic in the Marolles.

Susan Carroll meets the man who runs it

Guy-Bernard Cadière once travelled the globe as a saxophonist for Serge Gainsbourg and Viktor Lazlo. When he later became a surgeon, the world tours didn't stop. But this time, he was using different kinds of instruments – ground-breaking surgical techniques that changed operations forever.

Sitting in his office in the bowels of Saint-Pierre hospital in the Marolles, a sprawling institution that is one of the city's oldest, Cadière says he was in the right place at the right time to get involved in laparoscopy, or keyhole surgery. "It was a good opportunity for a young surgeon with everything to prove," he says.

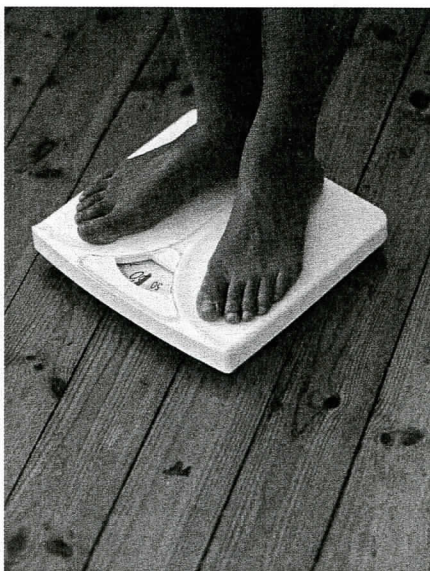
The new techniques revolutionised surgery. Rather than opening a patient up, laparoscopy allows surgeons to operate through small incisions. Carbon dioxide is used to inflate the abdomen and a pencil-thin telescope device equipped with a camera and light is placed inside the patient. This projects images from inside the body onto a screen, allowing surgeons to perform precise procedures and reducing patient pain and recovery time. Soon, says Cadière, surgeons will be able to do operations remotely from a console, using robotic instruments.

Professor Cadière became a pioneer in the new techniques and began performing demonstration operations all over the world. "Laparoscopic operations are shown on a screen, so you can demonstrate it in auditoriums and conferences," he says. "It was spectacular." He has done more than 100 live operations across the globe and was involved in the first laparoscopic obesity surgeries in the early 1990s. This was to become his life's work.

"Obesity is the world's worst public health problem," he explains. "And this is the only treatment to have proved its efficacy."

At his clinic, Prof Cadière and his team have performed more than 6,000 operations on people with morbid obesity. "My patients come from all over the world, from the US, Britain and the rest of Europe." The clinic offers special airport-to-airport deals for Americans, who stay at the nearby Hilton hotel. These deals cost €11,000 to €14,000, a significant

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Lab-band surgery can help the obese to lose dozens of kilos

saving on similar procedures at home.

The two main procedures are lap-band surgery and gastric bypass. In the first, a prosthesis is tied around the stomach, creating a small pouch, with a calibrated opening to the rest of the stomach. This limits the amount of food that the stomach can hold and means the patient will feel full more quickly and for longer.

The reversible surgery, which can also be adjusted as patients lose weight, can help people to lose up to two-thirds of their excess weight, dozens of kilos in some cases.

Gastric bypass surgery creates a small stomach pouch, too, but then attaches a part of the small intestine to it, allowing food to 'bypass' parts of the intestine, meaning calories won't be absorbed. This surgery is more drastic, allowing patients to lose more weight than the lap-band option, but also opening them up to greater risks.

Still, says Prof Cadière, the surgery is often a life-saving procedure. "These are a way to help the patient to learn how to eat normally," says Prof Cadière. "They are obese because, in our society, it's possible to eat anywhere. Chaotic eating patterns have replaced three regular meals a day. And we never move."

To find out more about the clinic, see www.lap-surgery.com.