



Better Me

The ins and outs of cosmetic surgery

Our fast-paced, health-conscious, youth-oriented society, well acknowledges the advantages of cosmetic enhancement. Today, both sexes seek plastic surgery to boost their career and social status, as well as increasing their self-confidence, in a society where individuals live and work longer. In this competitive environment, professionals need to prove their adaptability and willingness to 'stay in control', hence the growing need for 'quick-fixes'.

Indeed, the increasing demand for plastic surgery has favoured the significant technological and procedural advancements made (less recovery time, lower risk of death and better results) in a relatively short amount of time, borrowing techniques from other medical fields like reconstructive surgery, laser technology, microsurgery and tissue engineering.

Although previously reserved to media professionals, the showbiz and the well-off, cosmetic surgery is now widely accessible to middle class people, who see it as an 'investment' on themselves. More recently, many teenagers see plastic surgery as a solution to their physical concerns. The media were quick to spot the 'cosmetic trend' through questionable reality programs, raising the issue of the limits between vanity and necessity, ethical and unethical practice.

Starting with breast augmentation, the most popular procedures include: rhinoplasty (nose reshaping), liposuction (surgical removal of fat), blepharoplasty (removing excess skin and fat from around upper and lower eyelids), otoplasty (repositioning or reshaping ears), the tummy tuck (removing excess fat and skin around the waist to form a younger, flatter stomach), the facelift (removing wrinkles and visible signs of age from the face by smoothening the skin) and

cheek or chin implants (to achieve facial balance). Arm, neck and torso uplifts are also quite common, as they remove sagging skin and firm the contour of the silhouette.

Today, patients benefit from improvements in surgical equipment, anaesthetic techniques and better anatomic understanding. New computer software has helped improve diagnosis as a surgeon can input photos of the patient and modify them to predict the desired result. During surgery, video-assisted equipment enables more precise and smaller incisions, resulting in smaller, less visible scars. Whereas, lasers can cut tissue without bleeding, melt fat or reduce wrinkles. Tissue engineering (growing body parts from our own cells) or fat grafting (using fat's ability to take on the qualities of its context tissue) for augmentation, could one day announce the end of implants.

However, as Teenage Plastic Surgeon, Frederick N. Lukash explains in his challenging book, 'The Safe and Sane Guide to Teenage Plastic Surgery' (Benbella Books, Dallas, 2010), plastic surgery, like any kind of surgery involves careful thought and patients should be well aware of the unavoidable risks and the strict rules that should be followed to minimize them. As he writes: "Anyone with a medical licence can in theory practice plastic surgery and claim to be a plastic surgeon. As long as society, and especially the media, allows and promotes the drama of plastic surgery, and there is no discrimination between who is an expert and who is not, the burden is heavy on the prospective patient and family to find a true expert."

Dr. Lukash who has thirty years of experience with young people facing image problems due to irregular ears, noses or breasts, is fully convinced of the advantages of cosmetic surgery on teenagers: "When teens fit in, looks be-

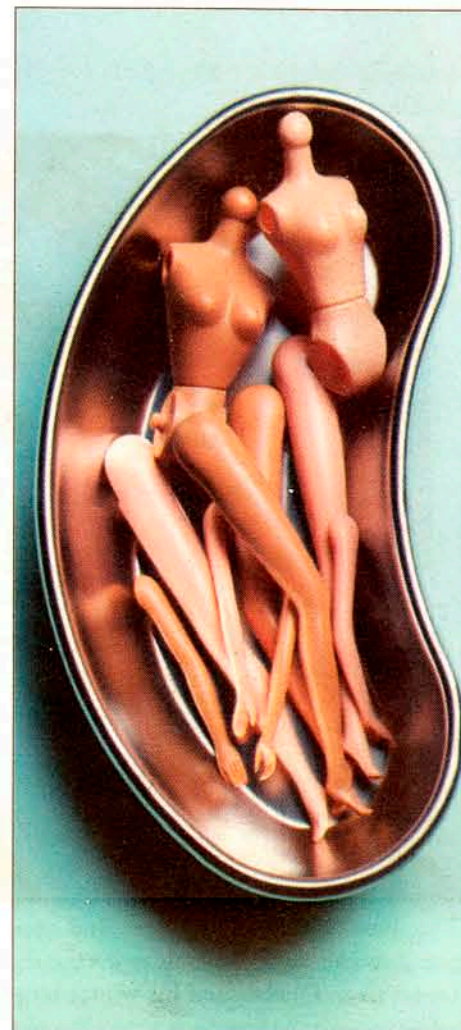
come the background to the rest of their living. When they don't fit in, their appearance and how they feel about it becomes all consuming... Teens have voices that need to be heard."

He nonetheless rebels against the harmful effect the media have on adolescents', and adults' self-esteem. The media traditionally dramatize and sensationalize anything that is thought to 'sell'. From extreme, edgy procedures glamorous celebrities go through to achieve idealised physical perfection to the scary, monstrous outcomes of cosmetic disasters, the life or death feeling repels and frightens a vulnerable, young audience that is faced with contradictory and confusing messages.

At its most extreme, plastic surgery obsession and its never satisfying results, is linked to a psychological condition known as BDD (Body Dysmorphic Disorder), which affects only 1% of the population. Symptoms usually appear after surgery when a dissatisfied patient requires further interventions, which will, in turn, be equally dissatisfying, as he or she falls deeper into surgery addiction. The media are too keen to seek such sensational stories and splash them for our entertainment.

Certain 'miracle' implant surgeries, which promise to give you J. Lo's buttocks or Schwarzenegger's chest or even perfect calves in 'no time', are placed in moving body parts and their utility is quite questionable. Made of tough, solid silicone, they can slip out, pierce and run a higher risk of infection, as explains Dr. Lukash. They only superficially and temporarily improve the silhouette and need long-term maintenance. Easy and quick solutions for Bionic creatures: As long it looks perfect, it doesn't really matter if it's healthy, and if it breaks, they'll get it repaired.

Additionally, fiction series like Nip/Tuck or



Peter Dazeley
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reality TV shows like: 'Extreme Makeover', 'Look Good Naked' (learning how to take your clothes off on television), 'Supersize vs Super-skinny' (an obese and an anorexic exchange meals while we learn how to stay fit), 'I Want a Famous Face' (get your favourite celebrities' looks and pose for Playboy magazine), 'The Swan' or 'Dr. 90210' make use of people's anxiety and elevate pathetic exhibitionism to the rank of achievement. Contemplating surgery? Turn off the television.

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