

In Pursuit of Beauty: Medical Cosmetic Procedures

“So, tell me what you don’t like about yourself.”

This is what fictional plastic surgeons Dr. Sean McNamara (played by Dylan Walsh) and Dr. Christian Troy (played by Julian McMahon) say to all their patients during consultations in the hit series-for-cable Nip/Tuck. However, this sentence might well be what aesthetic surgeons all over the world say to their patients—tell me what you don’t like about yourself and I will change it through medical cosmetic procedures.

And millions of people have answered this particular persuasive prompting. If beauty is art and our bodies are our canvasses, then these medical methods are the brushes and colors that surgeons, as modern artists, use to create the perfect masterpieces.

The number of medical cosmetic procedures done for 2004 in America alone reached more than 14.7 million according to statistics by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) as published in their website, www.plasticsurgery.org. The reason for this staggering number could be attributed to a lot of factors.

Range of choices

With technological advances in medical cosmetic procedures, people now have a wide range of options practically at their fingertips.

Those who want to lose unwanted fat deposits have liposuction. Breast enlargements can be saline-filled silicone implants or soy-filled ones. Wrinkles, big noses, droopy eyelids can now be erased or reshaped through facelifts, nose lifts, and eyelid surgeries.

For those who are afraid of being cut up, non-surgical procedures like Botox® and collagen injections, laser removal of superfluous hair, warts, and other skin imperfections, and reduction of acne and chicken pox scars through dermabrasion are available.

Those who are on a tight budget can opt to go to surgical spas in other countries like Thailand or India where operations are so much cheaper.

These options have broadened the scope of medical cosmetic procedures to include men, young girls, and even boys.

Societal pressure

Let’s face it; society puts a lot of value on beauty. Society also creates its own criteria for beauty—what type of hair and skin is good, what shape of body is better. Since no one wants to be branded by society as ugly or funny looking, a lot of people are trying so hard and spending so much just to conform to society’s rules.

Sullivan (2001) states, “The pursuit of beauty is big business in modern societies. Americans spend \$20 billion annually on products advertised to enhance appearance.... Cosmetic surgery inscribes our gendered beliefs about appearance, physical fitness, and age in our flesh.”

Of course, the manic pursuit for beauty of many celebrities helps imprint society’s rule even deeper. If celebrities like Cher or Michael Jackson or Pamela Anderson, who are supposed to be beautiful already, still go for plastic surgery, then ordinary Janes or Toms should follow to achieve even just a tiny portion of these stars’ good looks.

Psychological beliefs

Sullivan further notes:

...for many, this (enhancing appearance) is not enough. Dissatisfaction with personal appearance is widespread, particularly among women. Surveys indicate that one-half are unhappy with one of more aspects of their bodies (Cash 1997). They would like to change, rather than merely enhance, their appearance. More than one-third would like to alter their thighs. One-fourth would like to change their buttocks, and about the same proportion would like to erase their facial wrinkles. Nearly one in five want different breasts and one in seven want different noses. Although American men do not express as much discontent as women with their personal appearance, about one-fourth would like to modify one of more of their own body parts.

With cultures that compel people to always be beautiful, it is no wonder that many members of today’s societies feel inferior about their bodies. They’ve been brought up to think that to be accepted, promoted, and even loved they must change their appearances. Afterwards they can feel the joy, get the monetary reward, and achieve the companionship that better looks offer.

Media gambits

The increase in information—ads, features, and even shows—on surgical procedures through mass media—primarily TV, internet, and magazines—has made these procedures within the easy reach.

Besides Nip/Tuck, the reality show The Swan also deals with cosmetic procedures. It transforms “ugly ducklings” into “beautiful swans.” Participants go through a rigorous process of surgery, exercise, diet, and make-over to achieve their hoped-for beauty.

Young people are in it too. They undergo cosmetic surgery in Music Television’s (MTV) reality show “I want a Famous Face” to be able to look like their favorite stars. MTV has made it possible for their contestants to have, as the pop song “Liquid Dreams” goes: “A mix of Destiny's Child/Just a little touch of Madonna's wild style/With Janet Jackson's smile/Throw in a body like Jennifer's (Lopez).”

Britney Spears is also quite popular with teenagers. Or maybe, Barbie?

Taking it to the extreme

Millions of girls all over the world idolize Barbie’s 36-24-36 plastic body and perfect face. Lately there’s been much news on a woman who has made cosmetic surgery her hobby because she wants to be a living Barbie.

CBS Broadcasting Inc, through its website CBS.com, published an interview with Cindy Jackson, who is originally from Ohio. Cindy confesses that “Barbie was the blank canvas I filled in all those years ago. It was still my role model.”

Cindy has undergone 31 operations in 14 years including forehead laser surgery, two upper and lower eye lid operations, cheek implants, two nose lifts, facelifts, chin reduction, several lip collagen injections, tattooed eyebrows, eyeliner, and lip liner, liposuction, breast implants, and many more—all for about \$100,000.

To match Cindy’s Barbie, Tim Whitfield Line of London, who saw Cindy on a talk show, has become a living Ken doll. He has changed his name to Miles Kendall, spent \$50 thousand, and gotten himself a new face and a new life, opening his own bar with the help of his new best friend, Cindy.

The other side of the scalpel

Some people may view Tim and Cindy’s make-overs as too extreme bordering on psychological imbalance. But other people may also see the other, more positive side of what these two have done.

On the ASPS website, some patients have shared the positive ways cosmetic surgery has helped their lives. Chad Hummel, whose right hand was mutilated in an accident, got his life back on track through reconstructive plastic surgery. Tracie Metzger overcame her trauma after suffering breast cancer through breast augmentation.

There are still many more stories out there from the millions of people who choose to enhance or even change their bodies through medical cosmetic procedures. But in the end, as Cindy Jackson points out, “The surgery was a means to an end. That’s all. There

are so many people who are being held back by their looks, and if that can help give them a better quality of life and make them happier – what else is more important in life?”

REFERENCES

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