

Dangerously Perfect

Lisa Nies

Globe University

Dangerously Perfect

Today's society constantly strives for self-improvement in order to achieve perfection in body image. We are a youth-driven society and view aging as a curse. The continuing advancements in medical technology allow doctors to perform procedures to fix almost any part of the body, most often to prevent the natural signs of aging such as wrinkles, marks, and weight gain. The increase in cosmetic surgery procedures being performed around the world is directly related to this obsession with body image; however, although these procedures are viewed as solutions to flawed features, they may not be as perfect as they seem. Cosmetic surgery is an unnecessary procedure that puts patients at risk for many adverse effects or even death. Cosmetic surgery is not covered by insurance, and it can be very costly. The procedures carry risks ranging from ugly scarring and illness to death. The media exploits the need for perfecting one's self-image through television programming that does not fully reveal the realities of undergoing cosmetic surgery. There is a difference between cosmetic surgery and plastic surgery as author and Doctor Jean Loftus (2000) clarifies:

Plastic surgery encompasses both reconstructive surgery and cosmetic surgery . . . cosmetic surgery aims solely to improve the appearance of healthy people. It is a subspecialty of plastic surgery. Thus, all cosmetic surgery is plastic surgery, but not all plastic surgery is cosmetic surgery. (p. xix)

Anyone who is considering cosmetic surgery must consider all the risks and consequences, no matter how rare or small they are, and contemplate if undergoing an elective cosmetic surgical procedure is the answer.

Insurance rarely covers the expense of cosmetic surgery, and patients must pay the costs out of their own pockets. Many professionals offer easy financing and even discounts for

cosmetic procedures, and many insurance policies will pay the costs of treating medical complications associated with cosmetic surgery. Still, expenses for an elective surgery can become very overwhelming. Jane Bennett Clark (1999) claims, “Doctors are boarding the beauty bandwagon in droves, too, often to replace income lost to managed care” (p. 54). *People Weekly* magazine tells the story of Hope Donahue, a New Jersey resident who has undergone multiple procedures, who calls herself a “self-described recovering plastic surgery addict” (Adato, 2004, p. 93). After never feeling beautiful enough in her surroundings from sorority life to relationships, in 1990, she had her first surgery to adjust her nose, and throughout the following five years, received treatments to improve her lips, eyes, cheekbones, and breasts, placing her over \$20,000 in debt. Donahue says that she had become obsessed with a need to be perfect. She believed that each surgery would bring her happiness, and planned to stop when she finally felt beautiful; however, as this became an addiction for her, Donahue realized that she could not get enough surgeries to make herself happy. After a disastrous surgery to enlarge her breasts, Donahue realized her obsession. Thousands of dollars in debt for several surgeries that were not medically required and not any happier with her body image, Donahue finally sought psychiatric help (Adato, 2004, p. 93). Recovering from cosmetic surgery can be a long and painful process; paying a debt for a procedure that did not result in the anticipated expectations may be even more painful.

There are many pros and cons associated with cosmetic surgery. Cosmetic surgery can enhance and improve a person’s appearance, which, in turn, can boost confidence and self-esteem. *USA Today* magazine defines body image and offers a possible justification to cosmetic surgery in this statement:

Body image—defined as the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings a person has about his or her physical appearance—is thought to play an important role in self-esteem for many individuals. In addition, physical appearance and body image influence how persons are perceived by others. Research shows that attractive people are viewed more positively in practically every situation studied, such as education, employment, health care, legal proceedings, and romantic encounters. (“Focusing,” 1999, p. 3)

However, although there is the positive aspect of looking better and therefore feeling better, there are several negative aspects that counter the positive ones. Complications are a risk with any type of surgery. Cosmetic surgery is no exception; possible complications include post-operative infections, capsular contracture, ruptures, blood clots, bleeding, nerve damage, poor healing, excessive scarring, and even death because of the high risks associated with complications (Kornblum, 2004, p. D10). Many people are not fully aware of the extent to which complications can occur, and if they are aware, they do not believe that if they underwent surgery, they could be the rare case where complications actually do occur with possibly fatal results. No improvement is forever. Amy Newburger, a dermatologist in Scarsdale, New York, is quoted in *Newsweek* saying, “Wait and see what a lip implant looks like in 20 years, when the skin retracts” (Underwood, 2004, p. 68). There may be additional surgery required down the road that many patients do not anticipate. *People Weekly* published a story with a fatal twist about Olivia Goldsmith, author of “First Wives Club.” Goldsmith was not ashamed of people knowing about the work she had received as she had great support for cosmetic surgery and often urged others to do it. However, in her final procedure at 54 years of age, she fell into a coma during her surgical preparations before even beginning the surgery due to complications, and after days on life support, she died surrounded by her loved ones. Her death was a surprise to

those around her as she had only entered the hospital to receive a routine procedure, a facial tuck to tighten the skin. Goldsmith's complications were not caused by the cosmetic procedure itself but by anesthesia, a routine procedure practiced in hospitals daily for various types of surgical procedures, not only cosmetic procedures. The difference in her situation from other patients who suffer complications with anesthesia is that Goldsmith's surgery was not for medical reasons; she simply wanted to improve her body image. If she had not undergone the procedure, she may still be alive today (Green, 2004, p. 65). Janet Kornblum (2004) quoted Nancy Etcoff, a Harvard Medical School psychologist, saying, "Plastic surgery isn't a pure benefit . . . It isn't someone waving a magic wand and you look better. You're subjecting yourself to potential dangers" (p. D10). The American Society of Anesthesiologists reported that 1 in 250,000 deaths occur in the USA due to anesthesia (Kornblum, 2004, p. D10). Although this number is not high, it shows that there are risks involved, and these risks deserve serious and careful consideration before opting for a medically unnecessary procedure.

Reality television, such as ABC's *Extreme Makeover*, MTV's *I Want a Famous Face*, and Fox's *The Swan* has had a large influence in the increase in cosmetic procedures in recent years. This type of programming shows the positive outcomes that can occur from cosmetic surgery. They portray how an elective procedure gives a person more confidence, self-esteem, and assertiveness. These qualities can offer a more gratifying professional life as well as a more satisfying personal life. However, what people do not realize is that a large portion of the surgical experience occurs off camera and is unseen by the television audience (George, 2004, p. 40). Anne Underwood (2004) writes, "TV's new makeover shows are modern fairy tales, turning ugly ducklings into radiant brides with such apparent ease that plastic surgeons, of all people, worry that audiences are being misled" (p. 68). The producers take the entire process,

from pre-surgery to recovery, which can take months depending on the number and severity of the procedures, and cut it down to an hour-long segment. The manner in which the program is shown seems so simple and uncomplicated that it is no wonder the statistics each year are increasing at such a rapid pace (George, 2004, p. 40). Recently, the American Society of Plastic Surgery released a statement to remind the general public that plastic surgery still has the same risks despite the simplistic nature shown on reality television programs. They called the reality television shows “a serious cause for concern” and cautioned viewers “to have realistic expectations about cosmetic plastic surgery” (George, 2004, p. 40). Dr. Robert Stubbs, a doctor well known in the field of plastic surgery for his cosmetic work in the field of penis enlargements, says, “[patients] think that what they see on TV is real. What they don’t understand is, it’s edited. . . . Everything I do is major surgery” (George, 2004, p. 40). Extreme-makeover shows are intended to entertain viewers, but their effect is to create the perception that cosmetic surgery is a typical and normal procedure. There is no such thing as a simple, uncomplicated surgery because no matter how minimal it is, there are still possible side effects and complications that the patient must be aware of in order to be prepared.

More and more people are turning to cosmetic surgery as a solution to their body image insecurities. Easier access to financing, doctors who promise ideal results, and influence from reality television will likely keep this trend on the rise. For every example of a procedure gone wrong, there are several success stories. Doctors are being asked to fix anything that is not seen as perfect; however, the results of undergoing cosmetic surgery can be just that, less than perfect. Complications can occur in any part of the procedure whether it is before, during, or after the surgery. People need to be aware of the numerous dangers associated with cosmetic procedures

and determine if an unnecessary surgical procedure is worth risking undesired results, the possibility of additional costly surgical procedures in the future, or even death.

References

- Adato, A. (2004, September 6). Over the knife. *People Weekly*, 62(10), 93. Retrieved from <http://www.people.com/people/>
- Clark, J. B. (1999, April). Plastic surgery: Plain truths. *Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine*, 53(4), 54. Retrieved from <http://www.kiplinger.com/magazine/contents.html>
- Focusing on body image dissatisfaction. (1999, February). *USA Today [Magazine]*, 127(2645), 3. Retrieved from <http://www.usatodaymagazine.net/>
- George, L. (2004, April 26). Presto chango. *Maclean's*, 117(17), 40. Retrieved from <http://www2.macleans.ca/>
- Green, M. (2004, February 2). First Wives Club author Olivia Goldsmith dies during cosmetic surgery. *People Weekly*, 61(4), 65. Retrieved from <http://www.people.com/people/>
- Kornblum, J. (2004, January 22). There's a risk to the beauty of surgery [Final edition]. *USA Today*, p. D10. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/>
- Loftus, J. M. (2000). *The smart woman's guide to plastic surgery: Essential information from a female plastic surgeon*. Chicago, IL: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc.
- Underwood, A. (2004, April 19). Face the reality. *Newsweek*, 143(16), 68. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com>