



Changing the Faces of South Carolina

BY DAN MCCUE

According to plastic surgeons throughout the state, it is one of the South Carolina business community's biggest secrets: Who's sprucing up around the eyes, the hips or elsewhere, and are they doing it to stay in the game?

Dr. Kimberly B.C. Goh of Myrtle Beach, for instance, said a growing number of men in late middle age are having their eyes done in an effort not to look younger so much as less tired.

"Today, because people either want or need to work later in life — and find themselves competing against colleagues 20 to 30 years younger as a result — they're looking for ways to look bright-eyed and bushy-tailed," said Goh, who's been performing plastic surgery in Myrtle Beach for over 19 years.

"This is particularly true of men. They'll come in and say, I've got these Bill Clinton-type suitcases under my eyes, can you clean this up?" she said. And with that, what used to be a deep dark secret in the 1960s and 1970s, is becoming quite commonplace.

"In fact, people are pretty frank about it; there's a lot more competition in the employment marketplace today, and they're afraid of getting passed over because they look tired or because their boss doesn't want to present an image of their company that's less than vital."

But if many of those seeking plastic surgery are being more open about their motivations behind the veil of doctor-patient privilege, that's not to suggest there's still not a fair amount of apprehension out there.

Catherine Sexton, office administrator at Capital Plastic Surgery PA in Columbia, said a certain amount of introspection remains commonplace when it comes to plastic surgery.

"Yes, patients are coming, but many still don't seem to feel comfortable revealing why they want a particular procedure," Sexton said. "Is it for business? Well, you often don't know. What you do know is prospective clients come in for something specific, something they want to change."

A recession-proof industry

Despite concerns over the home lending crisis and resulting near collapse of Wall Street, average Americans are continuing to spend money on plastic surgery, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

In fact, in 2007, the last year for which full-year statistics are available, 12 million cosmetic plastic surgery procedures were performed in the United States, along with 5.1 million reconstructive procedures.

The national numbers represent a seven percent increase over 2006, and a 59 percent increase from 2000.

While, exact, reliable numbers relating to number of surgeries performed in South Carolina are difficult to come by, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons reported a 19 percent increase in cosmetic surgeries and a 21 percent increase in minimally-invasive procedures like Botox injections and various laser treatments if the skin, in a 10-state region encompassing the Palmetto state.

A canvas of doctor's practices in the Midlands Pee Dee and Grand Strand found that most now schedule as many as three days of surgeries a week, setting aside two full days for patient consultations.

Nationwide, it's believed that between 15 and 25 percent of the surgeries performed annually are inspired by the patient's work-life and a desire to extend his careers. While keeping a job is a big motivator for some; others believe that plastic surgery will help them earn more.

That notion was borne out a few years ago when a paper by researchers from Harvard University and Wesleyan University concluded there was a sizable beauty premium in the labor market. The results confirmed a 1994 study by the University of Texas and Michigan State University that found men and women with above-average looks receive a pay premium, while workers with below-average looks receive a pay penalty.

What's getting done

The word "plastic" in the phrase plastic surgery comes from the Greek word "plastikos," meaning to mold or to shape. By far the largest percentage of surgeries done across the state involve breast augmentation, followed by nose reshaping, eyelid work and tummy tucks, according to a number of local practices.

Goh said she also gets a lot of requests for liposuction, particularly from those



Dr. Kimberly B.C Goh

wanting take off that last little bit of love handles that diet and exercise alone couldn't budge.

While the number of men seeking plastic surgery remains relatively low compared with women, the percentage of increase in males interested in forehead lifts, Botox treatments and other treatments has risen dramatically, she said.

As one might imagine, while any practitioners perform a number of surgeries a week, the industry is subject to seasonal influxes. For instance, the number of breast implants and tummy tucks performed rises significantly in the spring, Goh said.

Ashley Hawley, office manager for Dr. Allen Brill in Columbia, said Botox and other "fillers" have been big items in his practice of late, as are nose surgeries and facelifts.

"It is mostly things that will get a more youth look back into their face without looking like they had something done," Hawley said. "For a lot of people it's about seeking a boost for their self-confidence. For others, well, it could be that they just got a divorce and got a big settlement, and are taking care of something that's bothered them a long time."

As the social stigma has decreased, practices like Dr. Brill's is seeing an increase in men and an evolution of some of the procedure they ask for, Hawley said.

"Hair removal has been a big one; removal of hair from their backs and from their underarms," she said.

What's it cost?

The total cost of procedures may be influenced by many variables, including the demand for the specific procedure, the time and effort it requires, whether an anesthesiologist is needed, and associated lab and medical fees.

Prices also vary from patient to patient based on their specific needs and medical history. The current national average for breast augmentation is about \$3,800, while eyelid surgery is about \$3,100 and liposuction costs about \$2,900. By comparison, a typical Botox treatment looks positively affordable at \$500 and microdermabrasion cheap at \$283.

Politicians, sales people, most frequent patients

So who's getting work done?

According to Dr. Stephen J. Kroll of the Columbia Ambulatory Plastic Surgery Center in Columbia, politicians and sales people are two of the biggest occupational groups seeking a more youthful appearance.

Conversely, medical professionals and attorneys are among the rarest of visitors to his office.

"[The lack of attorneys] surprises me, but then, maybe they're just going somewhere else," Kroll said.

Liposuction is Kroll's most requested surgery, followed by breast reductions for both men and women.

"More and more men are opting for plastic surgery, and it almost involves love handles or some other area of their body they just can't resolve themselves," the doctor said.

Establishing a motivation for plastic surgery isn't rocket science, Kroll continued.

"As a society, we're putting a greater emphasis on youth and appearance at exactly the same time that many people are staying in the workforce longer," he said. "That being the case, there's a great concern about perpetually looking tired or hung over. The old venerable look has its place, but generally, it's the refreshed look that's the look of the present."

According to Ashley Hawley, prices for procedures done in South Carolina tend to be a few hundred dollars lower. For instance, she said, many plastic surgeons in the state are offering Botox treatment in the \$300 range.

Regardless of what procedure one is considering, the first and most important step is doing one's homework and picking a doctor and procedure carefully. Too radical a change in one's appearance could cause a career-related investment to backfire.

"The goal is to go back to work and have people comment on how rested you look and to ask whether you've been on

vacation, changed your hairstyle or lost a little weight, Goh said. "If enhancing your career is your goal, you don't want to go back to work with that over-done look so often associated with Hollywood celebrities."

The good news is the task of finding a good surgeon has become easier in recent years thanks to the large amount of information about plastic surgery that can be found online, Sexton said. In fact, at least a dozen plastic surgeons in the Columbia area maintain extensive Web sites about their work and plastic surgery in general, as do equal numbers based in Charleston and the Myrtle Beach area.

Both Sexton and Goh recommend choosing an American Society of Plastic Surgeon member, as such surgeons are qualified, trained and properly certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery. They adhere to a strict code of ethics, receive continuous education and operate only in accredited facilities.

What's more, to receive certification, they are required to have at least six years of surgical training and experience, with at least three years in plastic surgery. Still, even with a certified plastic surgeon, it's still a good idea for the patient to gather as much additional information as possible, Sexton said.

Among the questions that should be asked are whether one is a good candidate for a specific procedure, what risks are involved, how long a recovery period should be expected and whether one will need to take time off from work. After choosing a potential surgeon, the next step is to research the risks and benefits of the procedure one is considering. Among the things that are critical to discuss are one's expectations of the surgery, the potential side effects and recovery time.

A hand's on approach

Goh said she personally sits down with all her patients and asks them what they want done and why? Not only does such a conversation reveal the patient's thinking, it can also redirect the course of treatment.

"I've had women come in thinking they needed their eyelids done, only to determine, based on their concerns, that what they really wanted but didn't know it, was a brow lift," she said.

Goh said in explaining such a situation to a patient, she likes to be hands on and show them what she means in a mirror.

"It's about appearances," she explained. "So often times the best thing you can do is show, rather than tell them what you mean."

Although it's not as common as it once was, plastic surgeons in South Carolina used to be visited by a lot of Northeasterners who could get a procedure done here cheaper than they could in their own states. Goh said such patients were troubling, because they'd often go right home after the surgery and therefore be far from the surgeon if complications developed.

"An infection, for instance, is a very minor problem if you address it right away, but if it's allowed to progress, it could be much more of a problem. The same goes with a little minor bleeding," she said.

But it's just a matter of a patient getting ill, it can also be the difference between getting an A-plus result and a B. Goh said while minor complications are rare, those that do arise occur because patients don't realize how big a part they play in the success of their surgery.

"Perhaps the best illustration I can give for why one should see a certified surgeon locally was a patient on whom I did a face lift," Goh said. "Before she went home I told her to keep her head elevated and apply ice to it. Next time I see her, outside the office, her face was all swollen."

Concerned, Goh invited her back to the office, where the surgeon checked for complications and found none.

"It turned out she went home and proceeded to do housework," the doctor recalled. "What she didn't understand was that accepting the swelling as the price of doing some housework wasn't okay. Skin in that situation doesn't go back to where I tightened it. And if I hadn't run into her, she would have gotten a lesser result than what she paid for." ♡

