

A knife to the cheek

Seven wrong ideas about plastic surgery

by MICHAEL FINLEY
for *Twin Cities Business Monthly*

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When asked to do a story on cosmetic surgery, I blanched. This is a serious column about weighty matters for thoughtful business readers! Plastic surgery -- how does that fit in there?

But a funny thing happened. The deeper I looked into it, the more misconceptions about plastic surgery I discovered.

#1 -- It's a man's profession.

A quote sure to warm a feminist's heart: "The primary requisite for a good surgeon is to be a man -- a man of courage." (Edmund Andrews, 1861).

[Source: The Surgeon. Chicago Medical Examiner, 1861](#)

It's true that more cosmetic surgeons are male than female, and it's true that more patients are female than male. But the ratios are closer than you might suppose. The art and science of cosmetic surgery began with a French woman named Suzanne Noël, who noted in 1912 that Sarah Bernhardt, the famous actress, looked fantastic onstage despite being well into her sixties. Miss Sarah's secret? She used garment fasteners to pull her skin back into her hair.

Inspired, Madame Noël began operating on etherized bunnies, whose pelts struck



Madame Noël

Noël as similar in delicacy to human skin. In 1916 she performed the first face-lift. Without saving a life, exactly, Noël helped revolutionize medicine to a new role of helping people.

Today, the science that Madame Noël helped found is doing very well, thank you, with perhaps a fifth of area surgeons being women. Jennifer Harrington, a surgeon who practices in both Minneapolis and Saint Paul, focuses on breast reconstruction and augmentation procedures, and the idea that male surgeons make initial incisions more readily than female surgeons is news to her.

"Women pick up the knife just as easily as men do," she assured me. "There is no difference there."

The real difference is that plastic surgery requires a level of career commitment -- an additional three to five years beyond basic medical school -- that discourages women intent on marriage and motherhood. "Women are asked to wear more hats than men," Harrington said,

but that's not the same thing as misogyny. "I have always felt welcome."

#2 -- It caters to a female clientele.

It is unarguable that women go in for breast augmentation and lifts in vastly larger numbers than men. But men have made a beachhead in cosmetic surgery and appear to be set for the duration. They avail themselves of liposuction, eyelid surgery (blepharoplasty), and (yes) breast reduction.

I asked Bruce Cunningham, professor of medicine at the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities and Chair of the American Board of Plastic Surgery, if men were becoming as glamour conscious as women.

"A lot of it is happening in the executive classes," Cunningham said. Looking one's best is a sign of social status." But Cunningham's experience is that male patients often opt for surgery not for business reasons but because they have younger second wives, and they want to look better for them.

#3 -- It's for the glamour set only.

In a way, this is only just. It is a paradox of modern times that wealthy people spend more time in places that the very poor used to be consigned, in the sun and wind (although more often on yachts and polo ponies than picking cotton) than their counterparts in the earning classes. Thus rich people are often more sun-damaged and wrinkled.

Most plastic surgeons also do reconstructive surgery, to repair tissues damaged by accident, disease, other surgeries, and genetic conditions. Many Twin Cities surgeons do pro bono work,

as well, volunteering to perform surgeries abroad and among low-income people here, when surgery can make a giant difference in people's lives.

#4 -- It's driven by trends.

It's true that plastic surgery is extremely alert to new possibilities and serendipities. The idea of liposuction, for instance, came from gynecology. A French doctor who performed uterine evacuations discovered that you could suction out fat deposits just as easily. And think about Botox for a second. How odd is the idea of using botulinum toxins -- food poisoning -- to remove facial crinkles?

Nevertheless, Anthony De Angelis, a surgeon with Park Nicollet Clinic, says the more things change, the more they stay the same. "The greatest change has been in the area of laser therapies. Six years ago they were used to lessen wrinkles but you don't see that much any more. Now the big idea is thermage, the stimulation of the skin with radio frequency waves."

Lasers aside, de Angelis said, the newest treatment approach is not always the best. "Think of all the X-rays we used to take of people's toenails and throats."

Recently, De Angelis said, the FDA gave approval to resuming silicon breast implants, which had been banned for cosmetic use since 1991. Silicon was never taken away from reconstructive work, just from the cosmetic side. "The biggest trend is less technological than economical," De Angelis said. "The driving question is: What therapies improve your appearance, if only temporarily, with less recovery time, and

at a price people can afford? That's the democratizing idea behind CO₂ lasers and the whole Botox craze."

#5 -- It's magic. Cosmetic surgery is scar-free, where normal surgery leaves you looking like Frankenstein.

How is it that open heart surgery leaves you with a virtual zipper, but a nose-job leaves you without any scar at all?

"That's a better question than you think," said Joseph Gyskiewicz, another Edina-based plastic surgeon. "There are two reasons. One is that the face is thinner skin than, say, the back, with its many twisting planes of motion. Thin skin like the eyelid heals better than thick skin. The other part is that many procedures involve incisions in places you can't see. A rhinoplasty incision can be made inside the nose. A scar remains afterward, but not in a place you can see."

#6 -- By definition, cosmetic surgery is superficial.

"It's actually psycho-surgery, because you're operating not just on what is outside the person but what is in," said Bruce Cunningham. "Sometimes the desire to change arises from a deep feeling of dissatisfaction. Appearance has so much to do with confidence and well-being. Surgeons have to know when not to operate."

Sometimes you get a patient who looks outwardly fine, with no glaring deformities or injuries, but they keep coming back for additional procedures. Their problems go a lot deeper than the skin. See also: *Jackson, Michael*.

But the idea that appearance matters is not a crazy one. Numerous studies have

been done that show that people who are shown before and after photos of people who have undergone facial work, impute moral loftiness to the people who have fixed up ("They look successful" ...

"They seem to know who they are and what they want") and skepticism about the characters of the people in the before photos ("They look guilty" ... "They are hiding something").

These conclusions are neither true nor valid, but that does not stop people from leaping to them. Now, translate this moral prejudice against wrinkles and sags to the workplace -- a prejudice against looking older in a marketplace that places a premium on youth -- and it is easy to see why thousands of people wanting an edge in their career progress opt for a nip here or a tuck there.

The good news, if you can call it that, is that with the current job market, looking younger is less of an advantage -- because everyone is getting laid off.

#7: Plastic surgery can't be as meaningful as ordinary surgery

"In addition to cosmetic work I do hand surgery," says J. Bart Muldowney, who runs a successful practice in Edina, and teaches with Cunningham at the University. "The hand is like a Swiss watch, very complicated and delicate and difficult. It is trauma-driven -- people don't come to you unless something pretty bad has happened to them."

"Frankly, the results are not as rewarding. And as you get older, your own hands are less able to perform the precision tasks."

By contrast, successful cosmetic surgery changes lives from the outside in. Not every procedure is a triumph, but those undertaken with realistic expectations make patients very, very happy. And that outcome is a treat for the doctor as well.

Sidebar:

Top 5 cosmetic surgery procedures, U.S.

Rhinoplasty (nose reshaping)	354,327
Liposuction	282,876
Breast augmentation	236,888
Blephoraplasty (eyelid surgery)	230,672
Facelift	117,831

Top 5 non-surgical procedures:

Botox® injection	1,123,510
Chemical peel	920,340
Microdermabrasion	900,912
Laser hair removal	587,540
Sclerotherapy	511,827

Info Box

For more on cosmetic surgery, visit ...

American Association of Plastic Surgery

www.asps.com

Sources:

Joseph Gryskiewicz:
7373 France Avenue, Suite 208
Edina MN 55435
952-842-2000

Bruce Cunningham
University of Minnesota
612.625.0697

Jennifer L. Harrington
Harrington Plastic Surgery, PA
Northeast Mpls
Edina, St. Paul
651-290-7600

Anthony De Angelis
Park Nicollet Clinic
St. Louis Park
952-993-3504

J. Bart Muldowney
Edina
952-925-1111.

Allen L. Van Beek
Plastic Surgery Specialists
Edina; 952-830-1028.

Marie Christensen
Park Nicollet Clinic
St. Louis Park
952-993-3504

Jennifer L. Harrington
Harrington Plastic Surgery, PA
Northeast Mpls
Edina, St. Paul
651-290-7600