

Cosmetic surgery becoming the cash cow of medicine

Unregulated cosmetic and aesthetic surgery is a worldwide concern as both the number of doctors entering the lucrative field and the number of patients demanding cosmetic procedures has grown exponentially.

At the same time, however, the number of deaths from improperly performed procedures also appears to be growing.

Deaths from cosmetic surgery procedures, including tummy tucks and liposuction, have been reported from Australia to the United Arab Emirates. Meanwhile, many developing countries such as Vietnam and Thailand are reporting explosive growth in the number of clinics providing cosmetic surgery. The internet is rife with advertisements for cosmetic surgery clinics all over Asia and South America that offer cut-rate procedures mostly to patients in North America and Europe.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez used a television address last year to angrily denounce the growing number of physicians and surgeons willing to perform cosmetic procedures on teenage girls, in a nation obsessed with beauty pageants.

The Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons lashed out in December 2007 at a group of self-described cosmetic surgeons advertising half-price liposuction to patients willing to act as “live guinea pigs” for liposuction trainees, many of whom have no experience as surgeons. Society President Dr. Howard Webster acknowledged that in Australia right now, “any [general practitioner] can call themselves a cosmetic surgeon.”

In the United States, the industry is regulated on a state by state basis, and as a result, there is a broad array of approaches, from highly regulated to completely unregulated. But even in states with strict regulatory regimes, there has been a proliferation of cases involving unqualified physicians performing home-based cosmetic surgery.

In November, New Jersey police investigated the death of a 41-year-old woman who apparently underwent cosmetic surgery at a private home in Morganville. The case followed another tragedy involving a Massachusetts woman who died after a home-based liposuction procedure performed by a Brazilian husband and wife team who were not licensed anywhere in the United States as physicians.

California officials, meanwhile, are investigating the death of Dr. Donda West, mother of rap singer Kanye West, who died in November following a tummy tuck and breast reduction surgery at 1 of Hollywood’s most popular cosmetic surgery clinics. News reports confirmed that West, 58, had been previously turned down by another cosmetic surgeon because she had not been able to acquire a medical clearance certificate, which is standard practice in California for patients over the age of 40 who suffer from obesity.

News @ a glance

Island medicine: Hoping it will yield a recruiting edge, Prince Edward Island will invest \$1.2 million per year to create 5 family medicine residencies each year on the island in conjunction with Dalhousie University’s Faculty of Medicine, starting in July 2009. “Medical residents who trained here and become familiar with the Island way of life, and style of medical practice, have the highest potential to stay,” provincial Health Minister Doug Currie said.

Ebola strain no. 5: The World Health Organization says a new form of the deadly Ebola virus has been detected in a major outbreak of the hemorrhagic fever in western Uganda. According to a Médecins Sans Frontières exploratory mission conducted last month, some 115 new cases of Ebola fever, and 31 deaths, had occurred as of Dec. 11, 2007. There is no known treatment for Ebola fever, which has a mortality rate of 50%–90%.

Big stick: The Alberta legislature wrapped up its fall sitting by passing new legislation that curbs self-regulation by 28 health care professions in the province. Controversial Bill 41 has been assailed by the Alberta Medical Association as nothing less than “draconian” because it empowers the minister to reduce educational requirements, permits censorship of physicians and threatens patient privacy (*CMAJ* 2007;177[11]:1342).

Never events: American style fines for medical negligence and hospital errors should be levied when patients suffer harm and need additional medical care and extended stays in hospital, says England’s Chief Medical Officer Dr. Liam Donaldson. “Why should the health service, funded by the taxpayer, pay for the care of a patient that’s had bad care,” Donaldson asked following the release of a United Kingdom National Patient Safety Agency report that indicated there were 700 000 “patient safety incidents” in 2006/07, resulting in nearly 3000 deaths. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

gery. And the term cosmetic surgery is thrown around a lot despite the fact it is not a term that has a lot of integrity for licensing and accreditation bodies.”

Zuliani notes 1 problem is that most provincial colleges are created by provincial legislatures, which are primarily interested in the regulation of insured medical procedures performed in public facilities.

Kester says many people within the medical establishment have long considered cosmetic procedures to be unworthy of regulation, only to be forced to confront the issue after a patient dies

unnecessarily. Others cast the dispute as a “turf war” and reject arguments that only plastic surgeons should perform cosmetic surgery.

“It’s always been a trivialized area of medicine, and not thought of as real surgery,” says Kester. “That attitude has contributed to this problem. The fact is, a tummy tuck is every bit as stressful and risky as having your uterus removed. It’s a 2 to 3 hour procedure with all of the complications of major surgery.” — Dan Lett, Winnipeg, Man.

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