

The Ethics Behind Cosmetic Procedures:

The Strive for Aesthetics

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HUM 420

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7 December 2016

Abstract

The topic that is covered focuses on the ethics behind cosmetic procedures. With background information a further synthesis is developed. Is it ethical for patients to be seeking cosmetic procedures and is it ethical for doctors to be performing them? This question is highlighted as the procedures are unnecessary to the health of the patient. Unlike plastic surgeries that aim to improve the functionality of the body as well as improving aesthetics, cosmetic procedures are not aiding the normality of the body. Millions of people worldwide are joining the movement in recent years, causing corruption within the industry. The growth of cosmetic procedures will hopefully aid the development of proper technology to keep the patients safe from the risks that they currently encounter when choosing to have the procedure performed. These risks can be inconvenient or life threatening. In addition, the works of philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and Immanuel Kant will be incorporated to bring light to the dilemma that is produced by this topic.

In the world of medicine, cosmetic procedures have only come about due to modern technology. Beginning in the late 1800s a surgeon had performed the first breast augmentation but it did not take long for the medical field to create injectable materials to use for breast implants (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, n.d.). As a result of World War I skin grafting got more attention as surgeons were beginning to perform reconstructive surgeries (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, n.d.). As technology began to take off these reconstructive surgeries became more researched and eventually developed into unnecessary aesthetic procedures. However, even with modern day technology the risk that the patient puts themselves at is often unknown as it is clouded by the desire to look how they have always wanted. Trimming, tucking and sculpting have become synonymous with cosmetic procedures. Looking ten years younger is more than a reality where people go to many extremes to change the body they see in the mirror. From multiple procedures in one day to traveling the globe in effort to seek a cheaper option, patients are putting themselves at risks they may have never been able to conceptualize. With the increasing media attention on celebrities altering their body shapes, they may have unknowingly sparked a larger interest for society as a whole. Regardless of the amount of people seeking cosmetic procedures the question is still raised if they are ethical to perform because they are unnecessary for the patient.

In a photo published in the *National Geographic Magazine* it is captured how cosmetic procedures have erupted into societies around the globe. The top five non-surgical procedures in 2010 worldwide were Botox injections, tissue fillers, fat injections into the cheekbones, laser hair removal, and laser treatment for skin spots (Shyr, 2012). As suggested, people are not focusing on one particular aspect of their body. From head to toe people around the world are altering

their appearance. Perhaps aiding in the perspective of the increasing popularity for these procedures over a million people in the United States alone had surgical procedures and just as many had non-surgical procedures in 2010 (Shyr, 2012). However these are not limited to the United States alone. As mentioned it is a global phenomenon. In the early twenty-first century, Australia generated a sales projection for cosmetic fillers, performed through injections, that was worth over twenty million dollars (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003). When putting this number into comparison that this was the projected figure for 2003, one can only imagine just how much these figures have increased in the past thirteen years. In between 1997 and 2003 the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reported that cosmetic procedures, which includes both surgical and non-surgical, have increased by 228 per cent (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003). In just six years the numbers have almost tripled which is not just a small feat for those in the cosmetic procedure industry. People are continuously trying to find new ways that they can change their appearance.

It would be beneficial to clarify what is constituted as a cosmetic procedure since there is such a wide range that these alterations can be performed by. First of all there may be some confusion between cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery. Although some may use them interchangeably they are not the same thing. Cosmetic procedures are focused on enhancing the appearance of the patient whereas plastic surgery is often used to repair and reconstruct allowing the patient to function normally while also enhancing appearance (American Board of Cosmetic Surgery, n.d.). The doctors that are practicing in these areas are trained differently and do not need to meet the same requirements to graduate as they have separate goals during the surgeries (American Board of Cosmetic Surgery, n.d.). From here there are many types of options to

achieve similar goals for these patients. In 2003 The Sun-Herald from Sydney, Australia gave an explanation as to which three facial fillers patients often chose to have injected. These included restylane, collagen, and Botox (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003). As formerly mentioned there are risks that come along with having cosmetic procedures. These injectables, though they were leading the market in 2003, are not a permanent solution. “Restylane is non-animal stabilised hyaluronic acid in the form of a clear gel that is injected into the skin” (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003). Hyaluronic acid is typically used as an injection into joints to aid in osteoarthritis where it acts as a lubricant (Mayo Clinic, 2016). Although this substance is naturally produced in the body it will only last up to six months when injected into the face to smooth fine lines (Mayo Clinic, 2016). The next facial filler is collagen which is naturally produced in the body, however the filler that is injected into the face is a product of the connective tissues from cows or pigs that is used to smooth lines and plump lips for up to a year (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003). It may sound less harmful than other products because it can be found in the body but this is not the case. At least three percent of the population is allergic to this collagen filler (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003). Dermatologists are now suggesting that there should be an EpiPen close by in the emergency of anaphylactic shock in the patient (Kirkey, 2016). Lastly and possibly the most surprising is Botox injections. There have been many jokes made around botox that people can no longer make facial expressions but this is exactly the reality of this injectable. “Her once beautiful, animated and expressive face has been Botoxed for so many years now that it’s become an immovable mask” (“Going under the knife”, 2004). Botox is a purified neurotoxin and this means that it will actually paralyze the muscles in the face by blocking the release of acetylcholine (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003). Acetylcholine is found all over the body which is

the neurotransmitter that initiates the muscle contraction (Shier, Butler, & Lewis, 2015). The results usually last about four months, however if a patient is repeatedly paralyzing the muscles one can infer that it cannot be a positive result after an extended period of time (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003).

A question that is frequently asked is if it is worth the risk. For some people they may not find it worth the risk to repeatedly paralyze their face and sacrifice their facial expressions in order to smooth out wrinkles that everybody will get. “I hadn’t realised that... the natural process of getting older was toxic enough to be denied by other toxins” (“Going under the knife”, 2004). Yet there are many people who do believe it is worth the younger look because it makes them feel good about themselves. The self confidence they can gain from this procedure is something of value to them. From here one must be able to understand the drive of these patients to get these procedures.

Some women may argue that they are seeking these cosmetic procedures because they are only trying to enhance what they have, they are not trying to reverse the aging process but rather make it more enjoyable (“Between medical ethics”, 2014). It is the lure of something exotic or simply something different about themselves that may attract some people while some are trying to appear Westernized (“Between medical ethics”, 2014). Even though some patients feel that these procedures are worth the risks, not everyone is on board with the range of possibilities that can occur.

Now what happens to these patients when the procedure goes wrong and they are forced to live with something more aesthetically displeasing than it was in the first place. With over twenty-three million cosmetic procedures performed around the world in 2013 there is going to

be some margin of error (“Between medical ethics”, 2014). Researchers from Halifax in Canada interviewed women who did not have a positive experience that resulted in a range of effects from “unwanted skin changes to panic, anxiety, hypersensitivity to light and depression” (Kirkey, 2016). Although it cannot be proven that these are directly linked to their procedures, these are very real problems that these women are facing. Other side effects from these facial fillers are caused by the inaccuracy while injecting the patient. If the needle is injected too far or if they add too much or even not enough of the filler these can cause deep bruising and swelling (Kirkey, 2016). These results do not have an end date either. As it affects every patient differently it is hard to determine how long they must live with the botched results. Complications often range on a level of severity and some patients are sometimes left with one of the most serious issues: a blocked blood vessel. When the blood vessel becomes blocked it cuts off the blood supply to the tissues and the injected filler can travel through the body (Kirkey, 2016). Having a foreign substance does not usually result in favourable consequences, especially when it is in the blood system. Although rare, some patients suffer from dead skin or facial structures, stroke, and sometimes even blindness (Kirkey, 2016). Across the world there have been almost one hundred reports that patients have become blind (Kirkey, 2016).

However these side effects are not limited to just injectables. Lisa Espinosa was attempting to save money when getting a breast augmentation, tummy tuck and liposuction in 2004 (Campbell Laidler, 2009). She decided to travel to the Dominican Republic for the procedures where she unfortunately obtained an infection, became very ill and discovered that she needed a blood transfusion (Campbell Laidler, 2009). When patients go through situations such as these due to their cosmetic procedures, it is rarely ever the end of the matter. Lisa needed

reconstructive surgery for the damage to her body where her new doctor discovered a list of frightening things that happened during the previous procedures (Campbell Laidler, 2009).

“The removal of a healthy gland, severed nerves, multiple stitches embedded in the breast tissue, incorrect placement of her nipples and the aftermath of an infection due to the use of unhygienic instruments” (Campbell Laidler, 2009).

Unfortunately Lisa’s case is not special as there are multiple surgeries that do not go as planned. According to a study in 2004, the odds of having serious complications during a procedure in the United States is one to 298 and a death occurs in one in 51,429 cases (Campbell Laidler, 2009).

As previously mentioned, though the chances are low, there are deaths that occur from these procedures. A woman, Shatarka Nuby, who was only 31 died as a result of complications from procedures while she was serving time in prison for using fraudulent credit cards to pay for a breast augmentation procedure (“Between medical ethics”, 2014). This woman underwent ten procedures during the span of four years in efforts to enhance her butt, hips, thighs and breasts (“Between medical ethics”, 2014). The amount of procedures that the woman underwent puts her at high risk for complications alone. The doctor that performed the procedures was not properly licensed for healthcare, adding onto the list of red flags (“Between medical ethics”, 2014).

From the sheer amount of procedures performed annually, there is always a chance that a patient will find a doctor that is not properly qualified to be performing what the client wants. In London there is a 25 year old Irish doctor who is claiming to be an expert in her field and wants to “raise the standards of the beauty industry” (“Experts question cosmetics venture”, 2013). Although it is possible for such a young person to become a doctor, with the right training and process just as any other qualified doctor would take, there are some questions that arise with

this particular case. The president of the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, Rajiv Grover, mentioned how this self-proclaimed expert in the field of cosmetic procedures has had several years of unsupervised work (“Experts question cosmetics venture”, 2013). It does not yield there as this same doctor is setting up her own practice in order to train others in the field (“Experts question cosmetics venture”, 2013). This just becomes a selfish act. Doctors take an oath that they are to protect patients from harm (Edmonds, 2013). When somebody is trying to gain advances by using the patients that are trusting them with something that is occasionally irreversible they are breaking that oath. Yet this does not just occur behind the scenes of the cosmetic procedure industry.

Celebrity Kanye West’s mother had an unfortunate result of cosmetic procedures. His mother, Donda West, died from complications due to a cosmetic procedure performed by a doctor that the media focused around (California Health and Beauty, 2011). “The real risk [of cosmetic surgeries] lies not in the surgery itself, but in the misrepresentation and inexperience of certain surgeons” (California Health and Beauty, 2011). The doctor that operated on Ms. West has brought to light what patients need to be careful of. Although they had appeared on TV as a guest on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, Dr. Jan Adams was not even board eligible or certified for plastic surgery (California Health and Beauty, 2011). In addition to this, Dr. Adams had multiple cases for being sued for medical malpractice (California Health and Beauty, 2011).

Another example of finding a trustworthy doctor is of the TV show *Botched*. This show is based around the concept that there are multiple cases of botched surgeries that people need to have fixed (IMDb, 2016). These two plastic surgeons are performing reconstructive surgeries on these patients in attempt to help them get the look they always desired. In the show, the doctors

are proclaimed to be the best in the business. There are currently three seasons of these doctors helping patients return to living a normal life in the body they wanted (IMDb, 2016). However when looking for one of their names, Terry Dubrow, on the search engine Yelp there are a handful of reviews that are suggesting patients to take their business elsewhere. This doctor is accused of being egoistic and greedy all while not caring for detail like he is perceived in his show (Yelp, 2016). Former patients are saying that they are leaving with more issues than what they went into his practice with and that they would never return to him because of the prices and the awful work that he performs (Yelp, 2016). In addition to this, there are numerous websites that are highlighting his malpractice claims.

The influence that people feel from the media to have these cosmetic procedures performed is the social pressure that people are faced with. More often than not people are told that the perception of their personality is through how they look, “putting their best face forward” (Donley-Hayes, 2011). With increasing technologies it is possible that this has a whole new meaning. The ability to change what our bodies look like so readily is causing the perception that we are as resilient as plastic.

“The new economy, in which disposability is elevated over durability and plasticity over permanence, creates fundamental anxieties and insecurities that more and more people are seeking to resolve at the level of the body” (Donley-Hayes, 2011).

Since the industry is growing, it is also growing between the patient and their doctor. It seems that the relationship has become more collaborative than it used to be (Donley-Hayes, 2011). The patient is able to sit down with their doctor and talk about what they are looking for from the surgery. On the other hand though in consideration as to how much the industry has blown up in

recent years and the desire for these procedures, the patient has evolved into a consumer (Donley-Hayes, 2011). The industry is now viewing them as returning customers, often without the patient's knowledge. Once the procedure is performed, there are checkups and maintenance visits. They are almost forced to continue the visits in order to maintain the look that they desire.

How can patients protect themselves and reduce their risks? Despite the many cases of malpractice and botched surgeries there is still hope for those patients that are willing to do their research on a doctor. If they are willing to really investigate the doctor that they may be visiting for their procedures, a patient can greatly reduce the risk. In addition to researching the doctor, the patient must understand the credentials of that doctor; are they qualified to be performing that procedure (California Health and Beauty, 2011). Next it is suggested that the potential patient looks at malpractice claims. For if the doctor is qualified and really is an expert at what they are doing there will likely not be any law suits against them (California Health and Beauty, 2011). Most importantly, the patient must be honest with themselves. If they are feeling uneasy about the doctor and the practice that they are running it is probably best to avoid going through with the procedure just because they want it done (California Health and Beauty, 2011). Most importantly the patient must understand the risks that are associated with the procedure itself, not just the doctor that is performing it.

There is frequently new information discovered about procedures that have been around for years. Dr. David Becker, who is a professor of dermatology at the Weill Cornell Medical College located in New York, has recently stated that it is possible that Botox is inadvertently causing more wrinkles than one may assume ("Inject a little beauty", 2003). Other than the fact that the patient is required to continuously get injections if they want the results to remain, their

facial muscles are overcompensating for the ones that do not contract, putting more effort into making expressions (“Inject a little beauty”, 2003). This goes to show that even if the procedure does go smoothly it does not always produce a positive outcome. Another example of this is the French company Poly Implant Prosthèse, they produce faulty breast implants that are more prone to rupture than their competitors and they contain a type of silicone that is not meant to be used in a medical device (Edmonds, 2013). These were not restricted to France however. They are sold in sixty-five countries and brought into various countries by other means (Edmonds, 2013). With over 300,000 implants used, a fifth of these women had gotten the implants after mastectomies (Edmonds, 2013). What do the patients do from here? Some women had to have the implants removed at their own expense while others are still living with the toxic implant in their body (Edmonds, 2013). The implant has the potential to erupt in their body and not only would the silicone be leaking but it will absorb into the bloodstream. Once it enters the bloodstream there are a level of responses that occur and are often painful. The body initially attempts to get rid of the foreign substance and if there is no progress the body produces fever, inflammation, and scar tissue (Blakeslee, 1993). Since the silicone is sticky and in the form of droplets, proteins from the body begin to adhere themselves (Blakeslee, 1993). From here the body is still trying to attack the silicone and now begins to attack the proteins which can result in autoimmune disease, a disorder where the body’s immune system destroys healthy cells (Blakeslee, 1993). There are endless side effects that could occur and it is often a wonder as to why people would put their health at the expense of aesthetics. Yet it is still practiced and growing readily more popular so it begs the question, how much is too much?

Since there is no definitive answer of yes or no to this question it can be safely assumed that it is an ethical matter. It is a question of ethics for both the patient and the doctor. On the part of the patient it should be considered for the advantages and disadvantages for having the procedure done. As it is unnecessary the only benefit is that it is more aesthetically pleasing, there is nothing wrong with the way that their body is functioning before the procedure. Perhaps there are benefits mentally that would allow the patient more happiness and self-worth. Plato may argue that it is not necessary. In his work of *The Republic*, Plato states that when a person is “just” they are in harmony with themselves (Plato, 1992). One can assume that by this a person is in harmony with themselves when they can accept how they look and that their actions justify them as humans and not their appearance. In addition to this Plato says that “temperance suggests the idea of harmony” (Plato, 1992). Temperance, or moderation, is needed so that material things are kept into perspective. By this we are to appreciate what we have and to be able to resist the temptation of the things that we do not have. Furthermore Plato is an advocate for eugenics. “Those of inferior breed are paired with inferiors” (Plato, 1992). Perhaps by altering their appearance those within the city would not be perceived the same. Since eugenics is the biological manipulation of genes, this would not be the same and therefore frowned upon. The cosmetic alteration of their body does not offer a biological advantage in the process of evolution and would ultimately not be helping the generations, or society progress. Plato suggests that most of our focus should be on bettering the state rather than ourselves and thus aesthetic procedures are not going to better society as a whole.

Aristotle counters Plato’s perspective as happiness is the “highest good because there is nothing beyond itself” (350 B.C.E.). By these patients choosing that they want to have the

cosmetic procedures performed they are able to achieve happiness within themselves. If the procedure will be able to increase their overall self-worth then it should be right that they are able to have the procedure performed. In addition to this Aristotle speaks of virtue. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes virtue as the state of being (350 B.C.E.). With both virtue and happiness, being happy and acting in such a way that is well and proper, they are created through each other. However, Aristotle begins to counter selfishness and acting for something that is for our own betterment. He says that if we choose to act in such a way that brings our happiness before that of the state then the state itself is not able to grow properly (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). It would not be living successfully to put ourselves first but rather to put others before us and acting upon what we were meant to do will bring the most happiness and success (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). It could be argued that the position that the doctors find themselves in is what would be supported by Aristotle. If they are trying to aid their patient, rather than focusing on the financial aspect of it, they are fulfilling their actions. By performing these procedures and allowing the patients to be happy with themselves they are able to share this happiness with those around them. This allows virtue and happiness to be in harmony with each other and can be suggested that those around them act in similar ways.

“Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, 1781). This first formulation probably applies most to the doctors that perform these procedures. They should be able to treat their patients in such a way that they would only want others to treat them. If they are using improperly sterilized tools or putting their patients through painful procedures, they are not setting a standard of actions. Moreover, Kant’s second formulation can be directly applied to the doctors of cosmetic procedures. “So act as to

treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only” (Kant, 1781). The doctors who do not perform the procedures properly, or up to the standard that they should be, are using the patients as a means to an end. An end of financial wealth and the patients have to go through pain and unhappiness for the doctors to use them as a means. To elaborate, Kant is suggesting that we should not mistreat ourselves or others as people hold value for simply being human. Taking into consideration the perspective of the patient, they should not seek cosmetic procedures just because they want them done. There should be some benefit to having the procedure beyond aesthetics as the harm that is done to their bodies could last longer than the results of the procedure itself. Kant argues for this as he says that happiness is good will and that the act itself must be good regardless of the intention behind it (Kant, 1781). In addition to this, Kant proposes the theory of duty driven ethics that implies we have an obligation to act in ways that we would demand of others (Kant, 1781). As doctors it is their duty to uphold the oath that they have sworn into and protect the patients from unnecessary harm. When they cause damage to something that was not broken, they are not acting within their duty towards the patient. The patient and the doctor both must evaluate their own principles as well as how they truly believe that they should treat their bodies.

Personally, people should be able to rightfully and willingly choose what happens to their body. If they believe that their body is a temple yet they choose to have multiple surgeries to maintain how they want to look, then that is their right. The issue is more so when people do not properly understand the potential consequences of their actions. First this includes choosing the wrong doctor, one who is not qualified or inexperienced for the job. They may lead people astray when they are trying to find the proper procedure or doctor but it can also help lead them down

the right path. If people are willing to educate themselves on what the procedure should be like as well as the person who is performing the procedure, there should not be anybody stopping them. In addition there are numerous red flags that appear when people decide to travel abroad in order to seek cheaper options. Although they may save the money they are putting their body at risk for doing it. This is not suggesting that there are not doctors around the world who are properly qualified in their field but there are steps to take in order to find these doctors. There are far too many patients that will ignore how they feel about how the doctor conducts his practice and will continue with the procedure because of the results that they desire. People begin to chase something unattainable when they put themselves in that position. As a biology student who is currently aiming to enter a program to become a Physician's Assistant, there needs to be a stronger standard on how practices are run. The media is too much of an influence and health practitioners begin to lose sight of the task at hand which is to help the patient. Granted if the patient chooses a procedure that will cause pain then the doctor should properly inform them of the risks. Since that the area of cosmetic dermatology is the profession that is currently being sought out, there is a lot of grey area over the ethics of it. Procedures like laser hair removal or laser tattoo removal are arguably for some people unnecessary but for others it may be necessary. They may view the potential of happiness as a reward for something that may be expensive or painful. To many people it is the end result that is being focused on rather than the path to get there. If there is a will, there is a way.

The staggering amount of procedures, and the continuous growth of them, shows the demand of cosmetic procedures globally. "Yesterday's vanity is often today's health, or at least well-being" (Edmonds, 2013). With an umbrella of grey area over the ethics behind cosmetic

procedures it is difficult to rest upon a yes or no. The risks that are possible offer some a definitive answer of no. It is not worth the sacrifice of their body to try to look ten years younger. However for some it offers them answers that they have not found elsewhere. It is doubtful that anybody would have been able to predict the technology that would put these options into the patients' hands for procedures that are being performed now. Hopefully with the cases that are reported to have not gone as successfully as anticipated the medical community is able to grow from it. We can learn how to block the doctors that are not trying to help the patients, how to improve the recovery time, and ultimately reduce the risks that are involved. Either way, one cannot judge another without their experiences nor without their perceptions. We are just left to ask ourselves, "is it profound self-love or self-loathing" ("Going under the knife", 2004).

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