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WHAT LIES BENEATH
By Debra Taylor

Maintaining a healthy self-esteem and good relationships take time - so are the thousands of Australians who've had cosmetic surgery just looking for a quick life fix which will ultimately disappoint them, or are they on the road to true happiness? Debra Taylor reports.

Kylie's allegedly had it, Sharon Stone denies having it, Cher can't get enough of it and Michael Jackson has had far too much. We're talking, of course, about cosmetic surgery; nips, tucks, lifts, liposuction and reductions.

While magazines fill page after page with "did they, didn't they" photos, the figures, if not the faces, are telling. According to a 1999 report issued by the NSW Department of Health, the number of cosmetic surgery procedures in Australia doubled between 1995 and 1998. Suddenly, a previously taboo subject has become the stuff people's often unrealistic dreams are made of.

"I think Australia is now catching up with the US partly because it wasn't until the mid-90s that doctors here were allowed to advertise," says Dr Anne Ring, a Brisbane-based sociologist who specialises in the media and health. "Today cosmetic surgery is much more acceptable than it was in the 70s and 80s when it was regarded as vain and something people wouldn't admit to."

As ever, cost has a lot to do with it. "There's certainly been an increase in the number of procedures and affordability is one factor," says Dr John Flynn, president of the Australasian College of Cosmetic Surgery in Sydney. "Procedures are not inexpensive but they are certainly not as expensive as they used to be."

Now it seems, anything goes - or gets stuck on - and thousands of women, and an increasing number of men, are choosing to go under the knife rather than live with what might be perfectly normal imperfections.

"Being satisfied with body image is increasingly difficult for most people," explains Sydney-based psychologist Dr Lissa Johnson. "We are conditioned to compare ourselves to an impossible ideal, and cosmetic surgery has intensified that ideal. Models and actresses have fuller lips, bigger breasts, no wrinkles - faces are changing before our very eyes. Cosmetic surgery seems to offer a one stop shop for your confidence and wellbeing."

And the pressure to conform is all around us - on television, in advertising, at the movies. "As a British study in 2000 pointed out, young women now see more images of beautiful women in one day than our mothers saw throughout their entire adolescence," says Dr Ring. "And it's easier to bend to pressure and change yourself than it is to change society."

But being beautiful is too often confused with being happy, leaving cosmetic surgery mistaken for a ticket to contentment. "Thinking that you'll be happier if you're prettier is an easy trap to fall into," says Dr Johnson. "But if that is your goal, and you have cosmetic surgery, you are likely to have a poor psychological outcome."

In a recent review of 37 studies examining the psychosocial outcome of cosmetic surgery procedures headed by psychiatrist Dr David Castle from the University of Melbourne and the Mental Health Research Institute of Victoria, only eight of the 37 studies documented improvements in social functioning, relationships and quality of life.

The key is keeping your expectations realistic and not seeing surgery as a silver bullet. "It's important to have goals that match the reality," says Dr Johnson. "If you get a face lift and you don't expect it to change your life, you haven't set yourself up for distress."

Forty-three year old South Australian public servant Kerry is one cosmetic surgery patient who believes her attitude is right. "I don't feel the surgery will change my life in any way other than I will be happier with my appearance. I am having a face, neck, brow, and eye lift. I am also having breast implants, just to balance out my shape better."

It's all about attitude

But, despite the vigilance of cosmetic surgeons themselves, not everyone who undergoes a procedure has Kerry's attitude, and you need to be very sure you are undertaking surgery in the right frame of mind. "There is huge societal pressure these days to look a certain way," admits Kerry. "The increase in the number of people having cosmetic surgery attests to that."

Dr Ring believes the interesting thing to ask is, what is reasonable? "Of course people have the right to do what they want to their bodies, and in some cases people change their noses and are happier but to say every cosmetic surgery procedure will make a person happier is unrealistic."

Reality TV shows such as Extreme Makeover may be much to blame for these unrealistic expectations. "They gloss over the pain and the risk-taking involved in what is, after all, invasive surgery. You just see the happy ending, but what happens six months later?"

For many, six months later means more surgery. "Research indicates that between seven and 15 per cent of people who have plastic surgery and cosmetic dermatology suffer Body Dysmorphic Disorder [BDD]," says Dr Johnson. "Experts on BDD say that people with the disorder often suffer disappointment and decreased psychological wellbeing after cosmetic procedures, which can sometimes cause them to pursue multiple and unnecessary procedures."

The right choice

Weeding out good and bad candidates for surgery is something the profession itself is very much aware of. "Cosmetic surgery will not make life rosy or cure all ills," says Dr Flynn, adding that surgeons should question their potential clients. "There are clues you get when you are interviewing a patient. For example, if the person has unrealistic expectations, or if they say they are having it done because their boyfriend or husband wants them to. It's obviously not a good idea to do surgery on someone who is in a state of depression, or someone who points out a certain defect and you find it hard to see. They are probably too focused on one thing and unlikely to have a satisfactory result."

But leaving the decision about whether you are ready for cosmetic surgery to the surgeon is not ideal. First of all, says Dr Johnson, candidates have to take a hard, long look in the mirror - and not just at what features they want changed. "You really need to be honest with yourself about what is driving your desire to have surgery," says Dr Johnson. "A lot of people seek out surgery because they have a rigid idea of beauty. Yet if you look around at attractive people, it's often not to do with their looks but their personality, expressions, humour and so on. In an era where we are all time poor, surgery can seem like a quick fix. But real wellbeing takes time."

Starting with the inside, it seems, may be harder, but in the long term it's more fulfilling. Once you are happy, you may find surgery is the last thing on your mind. "One of the biggest influences on perceptions of attractiveness is a friendly expression". Says Dr Johnson. "So if you want a really quick face lift, then smile."

Face facts

- * Approximately 50,000 cosmetic procedures were performed in Australia in 1998 (double that of 1995).
- * Procedures in order of popularity were liposuction (10,000 each year), breast implants (4500 to 6000), facelifts (3000) and eyelid surgery (3000).
- * Patients mainly obtained information about cosmetic surgery from media stories and advertising (25 per cent) or friends and relatives (24.6 per cent).

I'll have what she's having

Satisfaction levels often correspond with a particular type of surgery

- * Breast reductions have the highest rates of satisfaction.
- * Young women who have a nose job tend to be the most dissatisfied.
- * People with a deformity are more likely to be satisfied with the outcome of surgery than people who are just seeking cosmetic surgery for its own sake.

Run, don't walk

Avoid cosmetic surgery if any of the following points apply to you

- * You have unrealistic expectations about how it will change your life.
- * You suffer from pre-existing depression or anxiety-related problems.
- * You are young - older women tend to be more satisfied with the results of procedures than younger women as their expectations are more realistic.
- * You are excessively dissatisfied and over-focused on your looks.