

DAILY NEWS

PLASTIC SURGERY'S UGLY SECRET COSMETIC TREATMENTS ARE BOOMING, BUT SOMETIMES THEY DON'T TURN OUT TO BE A THING OF BEAUTY

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Ballooning numbers of baby boomers are sipping from the surgical fountain of youth and many regret their overhauls. In 1996, members of the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons performed almost 697,000 purely cosmetic procedures, an increase of 50% over five years earlier.

These numbers represent only a fraction of actual surgeries, as thousands of doctors many with little or no plastic-surgery experience (and whose procedures are not counted by the ASPRS) are taking up the laser and scalpel to cash in on the lucrative practice of ironing out wrinkles and removing fat.

Physicians love the economics of elective surgery. They are paid in full prior to operating (finance companies now offer loans for epidermal renovations; a face-lift, say, goes for \$10,000) and they entirely sidestep annoying interference from insurance companies or HMOs. "Doctors of all types have begun to do plastic surgery because of managed care. They see it as a lucrative way to bring cash into their business," affirms ASPRS spokesperson Nancy Ryan.

Yet patients are often unaware of how frequently a tuck, implant or other alteration will not only fail to meet their expectations and leave them unhappier, but require surgical correction. Too, prospective patients are more likely than ever to be victimized by a sawbones who is insufficiently skilled: Plastic surgeons report a surge of patients seeking recourse for eyelids seared by improperly wielded lasers, collapsed noses from inexpert rhinoplasties, and excessively scarred faces following sloppy facelifts often performed by doctors they believe to be inadequately trained. Increasingly, procedures are being performed in offices or clinics without any of the governmental oversight of hospitals.

Simultaneously, the kinds of new procedures being marketed to droopy boomers have exploded, unchecked and unapproved, with few indications of long-term effects. The newly promoted "endoscopic face-lift" surgery using tiny incisions that allegedly results in faster healing and minimal scars, is extremely controversial, with critics complaining that results, too, are minimal, and that insufficient data exists concerning effectiveness.

Steve North, Wong's attorney, says many of the saddest victims of plastic surgery botches are immigrants or uneducated, unsophisticated people who are lured into procedures by misleading advertising. "These people are misled to think surgery is a piece of cake; that they're going to get great results with very little downside," says North.