

Face it!

CAVEAT EMPTOR: That's advice you expect to hear when redoing your kitchen, not so much your face. Yet that's exactly what medical insiders recommend to women who are contemplating a visit to a plastic surgeon's office.

And we're not talking about negotiating a fair price or finding hygienic facilities; we mean sourcing a qualified doctor. In this burgeoning medical field known as aesthetic plastic surgery — which has grown 155 per cent since 1997, according to a new American survey — what you see is not always what you get; you must ask questions to ensure both your safety and your satisfaction.

"The field of aesthetic surgery is less regulated than other surgical fields," says Elizabeth Hall-Findlay, past president of the Canadian Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery and the owner of Banff Plastic Surgery in Alberta.

"Sadly, there have been problems, even deaths, and often the ones you hear about were surgeries performed by a physician who was not trained as a plastic surgeon."

In Canada, the regulation and certification of medical specialties, including plastic surgery, falls to the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons. But the breakdown



**READY, WILLING AND
ABLE TO PAY FOR A TRIP
TO THE PLASTIC SURGEON?
READ THIS FIRST**

“Why don’t the regulatory bodies in Canada treat plastic surgery with the same respect as cardiac surgery?”



occurs because, in some provinces, any surgeon, regardless of his certification, can set out a plastic surgery shingle.

Explains Hall-Findlay: “An otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat doctor) can be well trained in nose surgery, but not in breast surgery. An ophthalmologist may have training in eyelid surgery, but not nose surgery.” Yet both are allowed to sell their services in plastic surgery. Complicating this picture is the fact that each province has its own licensing authorities whose standards vary across the country.

Hall-Findlay says this lack of consistency is confusing and frustrating. “Many of us don’t understand why the regulating and licensing bodies in Canada don’t treat plastic surgery with the same respect or concern as they do cardiac surgery.”

■ **DOCTOR, DOCTOR GIVE ME THE NEWS** //// This begs the question: Are women putting their health at risk in the name of beauty?

In a word, no. Plastic surgery is extremely safe, says Hall-Findlay, when performed by a qualified surgeon. “Deaths or serious complications are very rare — many plastic sur-

geons will never have a death. I have been in practice for almost 30 years and I’ve never had a death.”

So just where do you go to find the best surgeon? Start at the Royal College’s website (royalcollege.ca) and click on Directory of Fellows for a comprehensive listing of doctors by location and specialty. Or simply type in your doctor’s name and city and her specialty will appear, along with the year she received her plastic surgery certification. As the Royal College points out, all specialists have completed rigorous training and participate in ongoing professional development.

■ **PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT** //// In addition to validating the surgeon’s credentials, it’s also important to ensure he is experienced, observes Frank Lista, medical director of The Plastic Surgery Clinic in Toronto and Mississauga, Ont.

“Surgical results are directly related to the surgeon’s individual volume. The surgeon who does 500 surgeries is better than the one who does 200,” he says. “Some people are turned off by that; they feel they are in a production line. But you know what? This gives the best surgical result, and it’s been reported in surgical literature.”

ASK THIS BEFORE YOU DO THAT!

Is there an eye job in your future? Maybe a jiggle in your jowl you’d like to tame? Before you plunk down a wad of dough, there are questions you need to ask to ensure your safety, says Frank Lista, medical director of The Plastic Surgery Clinic in Toronto and Mississauga, Ont. And don’t be shy

about putting a doctor in the hot seat. If he takes offence or squirms, consider that a bad omen.

A competent surgeon with good standards of practice will appreciate your forethought and concern, says Lista. “If your surgeon gets weird about it, then it’s the wrong fit.”

Here are three questions to ask before you sign on the dotted line.

1. DO YOU HAVE HOSPITAL PRIVILEGES? You want to know if the doctor is associated with a local hospital and is able to work

there. “For instance, some obstetricians do lipo in their private clinics but don’t have permission to do it in a hospital, and you have to wonder why that is,” points out Lista.

2. WHO IS ON CALL FOR YOU? Emergencies can’t tell time. You could have a problem at 2 a.m., and you need to figure out before then what your plan of action will be. “If your doctor says, ‘Just go to emerg,’ that’s not good enough,” says Lista. Ask if he manages his own after-hours calls or if he has a call

group that will help you through your emergency — and get those numbers in writing.

3. WHAT KIND OF POST-OP CARE CAN I EXPECT? You can get a sense of this early on. If your doctor is difficult to reach or talk to, it’s not likely a good fit. Says Lista: “If you have trouble before you even pay or have had the operation, what’s going to happen afterwards?” Find a doctor who will map out your recovery plan for pain management and follow-up appointments.

All surgeries, of course, have risks; general ones include infection, bruising and bleeding, says Hall-Findlay. “But the risk is going to be less with someone who has been fully trained. One of the reasons plastic surgeons can get good aesthetic results with face surgery is because they understand the principles involved in reconstructive surgery, including the anatomy of nerves, etc., around the face.”

However, it’s not just about preventing complications, but also about being able to anticipate and then work around them.

“Plastic surgeons are best trained to prevent nerve damage — and in the unlikely case that it occurs, they are also the best trained to assess and correct any such problems,” explains Hall-Findlay. “Sometimes problems occur because the untrained person doesn’t know when things are not going right. They are not comfortable with diagnosis (for instance, understanding when a facial nerve has been damaged). They can’t recognize the problem and so diagnosis of a complication is delayed.”

■ **CAN WE TALK?** //// The other major risk of plastic surgery is not getting the face you thought you’d signed up for, again often the result of being in the hands of someone who is under-qualified.

Here, communication is king, and an experienced surgeon knows that, says Sean Rice, medical director of Rice Cosmetic Surgery in Toronto. “True, mistakes are few and far between, but unexpected results are different.”

The only way to ensure you get the face you want is to talk, talk — and then talk some more. “Both sides need to verbalize,” he says. “What the patient is expecting and what the surgeon can do may be different, so you need to talk it through.”

Skin type, bone structure, face shape — all of these elements play a role. You can ask for — and get — Angelina’s lips, but you can’t expect to look just like her after the procedure. A good surgeon will help you manage your expectations accordingly. It’s just one more reason for being your own advocate and shopping around for the best doctor.

“It’s your body and it’s your money, and no one is going to check it out more than you. Don’t assume someone else has done your homework,” says Lista.

“When I see plastic surgery gone wrong, or someone who’s had surgery by someone not qualified, they often say, ‘You know, I just assumed that this person had the qualifications.’ Well, there are good qualifications and there are lousy qualifications, and it’s up to the patient to figure that out.” ■

PRETTY REVEALING

In 2010, more than 7.5 million non-surgical cosmetic procedures were performed in the United States (no comparable Canadian stats are available). Topping the list were Botox, injectable fillers and laser hair removal, says a recent survey by the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

These hugely popular, minimally invasive cosmetic procedures are relatively safe, but the same rules apply as for surgery: Be aware of whose hands you trust on your face.

The first, and most important, rule when shopping for a minimally invasive procedure is to make sure you’ll be seen by a medical doctor — be it a plastic surgeon, a dermatologist or a general physician who runs a specialized clinic for cosmetic procedures, says Diane Wong, a cosmetic physician and founder of Glow Medi Spa in Toronto.

Just because a business calls itself a medi spa and offers services such as Botox, there’s no guarantee a physician is on site. And there should be. In fact, a doctor should be conducting every initial consultation. “Botox is a prescription drug. If you’re not being evaluated by a doctor, you shouldn’t be there,” Wong says.

Many complications that occur with minimally invasive procedures can

be linked to inexperience or incompetence, she says. They can include mild burns from peels or laser treatments, bruising or droopy eyelids or brows from Botox and asymmetry or disfigured features from fillers.

One of the most serious risks is blood vessel occlusion (a blockage that impairs the blood supply to surrounding tissues). “A trained doctor knows how to stay away from major blood vessels when using needles,” Wong says. “But if they don’t, the patient could end up with blood vessel occlusion or, worse, necrosis [death of the tissue]. You’ll be left with scars that are permanent.”

And remember, being a savvy shopper is imperative. Recently, online promotions have started popping up offering group deals on everything from laser hair removal to fillers. At the same time, many women are receiving email invitations to Botox parties.

Elizabeth Hall-Findlay, past president of the Canadian Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, warns against getting caught up in this trend. “Aesthetic surgery is not about bargain basement shopping. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” As for Botox parties, she says, “they’re unethical and any plastic surgeon involved in them would be censured.”