

Men who get their legs broken to gain height are not entirely mad

Research shows taller people are more successful but undergoing leg-lengthening surgery is still taking a step too far

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If you work at a place like the Financial Times, you tend to hear a lot about bond yields and Fed rates and what the US dollar is doing.

Last week, however, a non-trivial number of FT staff were talking about something else: a GQ magazine article about leg-lengthening surgery to make yourself taller.

This grisly cosmetic procedure costs tens of thousands of pounds and involves getting one's legs broken, having metal rods screwed into the thigh bones and learning to walk again with months of rehabilitation.

Potential complications include nerve injuries, blood clots, excruciating pain and the chance that the bones don't fuse back together as planned. Survivors, with luck, end up a whole 7.5cm taller, or up to 15cm if they get their shin bones extended as well as their thighs.

Astonishingly, the procedure is said to be flourishing. Hundreds of people around the world have it done each year.

I say "people", but the evidence suggests they are mostly men.

Many are from the tech industry, according to the GQ story, which was written by a 1.68m journalist in the US who watched a surgeon perform the operation at a clinic in, where else, Las Vegas.

Readers learn that the surgeon uses a device like a cordless drill called a "reamer" to hollow out the patient's bone and when the gadget is pulled out, "a warm, bloody slurry of liquefied bone and marrow and fat begins to ooze out of the hole with horrifying speed and volume".

The idea that anyone would willingly undergo such an ordeal, let alone pay up to £210,000 (S\$324,000) that the BBC says the surgery can cost, is baffling - except if you look at the data.

For well over a decade, studies have shown that it pays to be taller than average, especially if you are a man. A 1.83m-tall person typically earns nearly US\$166,000 (S\$238,000) more over a 30-year career than a 1.65m person, US researchers found in 2004.

Australian scientists concluded a few years later that every extra 10cm of height added 3 per cent to hourly wages for men, and 2 per cent for women.

Tall people seem to do better in business and politics, too. In US elections, the taller candidate won 58 per cent of presidential races between 1789 and 2008.

Chief executives in Sweden and the US have been shown to be about 1.83m tall, higher than average in both places at the time the research was done. Then there is love. Despite decades of feminism, studies show height is still a big factor for women when it comes to choosing a partner.

It is not entirely clear precisely why we discriminate against the less lofty. Some psychologists think it might go back to early human instincts to ascribe leaderly qualities to tall people deemed to be better protectors. Others think tall people themselves have more confidence and self-esteem, which, in turn, makes them more likely to succeed.

Either way, men who pay to have their legs broken for a few more centimetres in height are not being entirely irrational. Neither are they being remotely sensible. In leg-lengthening, the cost and risks far outweigh the probable benefits of being slightly taller.

Also, speaking as a person of above average height, I can say with certainty there are downsides to being tall. Flying in economy is horrible. Lower back pain is a risk, especially for women.

Also, at some point in your career, you will almost certainly come up against a shortish male boss and, regardless of what he feels about being closer to the ground, you will find it awkward to peer down at him or, worse, lower your head to hear what he is muttering. This is not just a tall female problem. Lanky male friends tell me they suffer it too.

Finally, statistics do not tell the whole story. History is full of leaders who achieved much, despite being of average height. So if you ever come across anyone thinking of getting their legs lengthened, tell them to sit down, sober up and think of Winston Churchill.