

What are the Ethical Responsibilities of a Medical Professional in Providing or Denying
Cosmetic Procedures?

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Introduction

Plastic surgery is a surgical field that is focused on restoring or reconstructing the human body for an increased quality of life. Cosmetic surgery, a subunit of plastic surgery, is defined as the alteration of the human body purely for aesthetic purposes. With the arrival of newer fads as beauty standards change, it's no surprise that cosmetic surgery has grown over time. Different beauty standards across cultures also help boost it. Within many Asian cultures, lighter skin is deemed more desirable as tan skin is associated with plebeian fieldwork. In Caucasian cultures, the ideal look is primarily eurocentric. The globalization of social media over the past decade has also contributed to the demand for cosmetic surgery. This highlights the topic of cosmetic surgery within the medical field due to its risky nature. Furthermore, social media has influenced beauty standards, leading to many individuals having an unrealistic view of what beauty is, giving way to many self-image issues and mental disorders, which relates to why more people are seeking cosmetic surgery.

Some patients, due to BDD (body dysmorphic disorder) or other mental illnesses turn towards cosmetic surgery in order to improve their self-image and confidence. However, cosmetic surgery is not a permanent solution and can cause individuals to continue seeking more procedures. Cases have arisen where an individual is dissatisfied with their surgery because of unmet expectations, causing them to get more surgeries which can damage their mental and physical well-being. This relates to the liability of medical professionals as some patients may see them as the ones responsible for the negative outcomes. What are the ethical responsibilities of a medical professional in providing or denying cosmetic procedures?

I chose this dilemma for my reflective project because of how beauty standards are portrayed today along with the destigmatization of mental health disorders that are centered

around self-image. By exploring the ethicality of cosmetic surgery, particularly targeting the mental well-being of potential patients, I will be able to relate it to my chosen career-related study of health careers in terms of medical ethics, specifically autonomy and the liability of medical professionals. The three key stakeholders I will be investigating are: the mental health support provider, the patient, and the medical professional. All three viewpoints allow me to access and explore this topic through different lenses, which can help me to accurately portray and understand the ethical dilemma at hand.

Perspective 1

An important perspective to examine is the one of the mental health professional. Ranging in craft, mental health professionals can provide support, diagnose disorders, and prescribe medications. When being involved in cases where an individual is suffering from a mental health disorder and wishes to undergo cosmetic surgery, the liability of health professionals comes into play. Additionally, with the rise of digital advertising, cosmetic surgery has become glamourized, leading to unrealistic expectations of the human body. This increases the chance that individuals diagnosed with mental disorders may undergo cosmetic surgery, making it necessary that a mental health professional should have a say in this.

It's no surprise that patients with mental disorders such as BDD (Body Dysmorphic Disorder: a condition in which an individual cannot stop ruminating over perceived flaws in their appearance) would find a reason to consider surgery. However, due to the continuous nature of BDD, the outcomes of the surgery do not fulfill previous anticipations, leading to a sequence of successive surgeries which could ultimately become identified as an addiction. Typically, BDD is apparent at a young age and due to its "continuous rather than episodic [nature], worsening over

time [,] shows a low response to psychopharmacological agents,” (Hostiuc, et al). Therefore, we can theorize that cosmetic surgery may not necessarily benefit the patient’s mental well-being.

Medical ethics come in when ethical issues arise from the violation of patient autonomy. If the conducting surgeon does not provide sufficient information regarding the complications of the surgery, costs, and risks associated, patients may form an idealized image of an glamourized result. “All these are thought by patients to be solved through cosmetic procedures...[they] sometimes request enhancement of the body part that is perceived as deficient... often [requiring] multiple interventions... and the perceived result is often unsatisfying” (Hostiuc, et al). Some patients with mental disorders may want to undergo cosmetic surgery, but this process may not help their mental disorder, making it essential for the cosmetic surgeons to educate the patients on this area and not worsen their patients’ mental states. This also brings up the liability of healthcare professionals as it could lead to negative impacts upon the surgeon’s reputation, which is another reason why they should be looking out for the patient’s well-being.

The main goal of any medical professional is to increase all areas of well-being for an individual. Therefore, if a patient wishes to undergo cosmetic surgery, they must consent fully knowing the outcomes, risks, and nature of the surgery. However, with the association between violation of medical ethics and increasing globalization of the Westernized beauty standards, it’s hard to fully help a patient who is suffering from a mental health disorder. As an aspiring surgeon, it’s important for me to consider the factors that affect this dilemma, including the patient’s mental health. I believe that when observing a mental health professional’s argument, the strength of it surrounds the fact that patient well-being is prioritized.

Perspective 2

The next important stakeholder is the patient. Before undergoing cosmetic surgery, the patient themselves must already know their own responsibilities and the risks of the procedure. There are a variety of safeguards that the patients should undergo before opting in for surgery, such as undergoing an evaluation in the event that they become disappointed with the results.

An important aspect to consider when viewing this dilemma are the four medical ethics. One of the four medical ethics is respect for patient autonomy. After all, “Patients have the right to choose to participate with their physicians and in their own health care decision making” (Nejadsarvari and Ebrahimi). Each patient has personal autonomy, and if they wish to undergo cosmetic surgery to enhance their physical image, they can do so while knowing all the risks. The physicians’ and surgeons’ tasks besides performing the surgery, is providing informed consent, which is making sure that the patients themselves know all the risks involved, and educating them on what possible consequences their decision could have. It is also very crucial that the patients are able to do their own research prior to even consulting with a surgeon (Espejo). This helps prevent any unrealistic expectations from forming.

Along with providing informed consent and becoming educated on the risks and possible consequences, it’s easy for patients to become misinformed, making it more important for a potential patient to thoroughly research all the hazards and other possible options. One of the main risks that the patient should be aware of are false advertisements. As cosmetic surgery continues to become more popular, there are many false advertisements and cheap costs that could cause an influx of individuals to become more interested in cosmetic surgery. In fact, there are also “some problems on advertisements of aesthetic surgeries by non-plastic surgeons, taking insufficient or incorrect information to the patients affecting the patients’ autonomy” (Smith and George). If the information provided to a patient is incorrect, this means that informed consent

isn't given, which breaks the law because the patient can't fully consent unless they are fully educated and know the risks they are taking. These glorified ads tempt those who are easily susceptible to misleading advertisements, and highlights how important it is to be fully aware of the risks and other alternatives.

However, educating oneself is just as hard as figuring out business scams. One study showed that 70 percent of those who sought to inform themselves about plastic surgery relied on the internet as their main source of information and also cited the quality of the surgeon's website as the most influential part of their choice of plastic surgeon (Smith and George). The rise of social media can also contribute to this issue by making it easier for individuals to fall victim to scams and receive a negative outcome. According to a research article developed at Penn State, "Social media can create a false sense of familiarity for prospective patients who build their trust in a practice's or physician's brand based on cues usually reserved for a patient-physician relationship" (Smith and George). Thus, the patient should constantly be aware and fact check their sources in order to prevent becoming a victim of medical malpractice by an offending medical professional.

Once the patient has been educated and provided with informed consent, then it's up to the patients to decide if they want to take the risk. However, according to Sieber Plastic Surgery, "It's incredibly difficult to pin down what constitutes a mentally 'healthy' individual. There are dozens of variables to consider, including...overall happiness" (Sieber). When an individual wishes to get cosmetic surgery, they must provide a reason for why they want the surgery. The surgeon will then evaluate it and decide to turn away or accept the patient, which may include mental health screenings. While the medical professional will do the best they can for the patient during this process, there's a chance that a patient will falsify information in order to get

cosmetic surgery, leaving the patient completely executing their own autonomy. There are many preventative measures taken, but it is still a problem that occurs due to a variety of reasons. I've seen people affected by societal pressures, leading them to take many risks to reach their goal. It's something that I as a healthcare professional will not be able to change, but will try to help negate its possible consequences.

Doctors should do the best they can to evaluate an individual, but there's components to consider. While a patient may be influenced by certain marketing tactics, the medical professional would need to fully respect patient autonomy and provide informed consent to the individual along with a mental health screening. When the patient is accepted for surgery, they are completely educated on the risks and other options, leaving everything in the individual's own freewill. When viewing this from the patient's perspective, I feel that there is a lot more nuance towards patient autonomy and the responsibility of medical professionals, thus, this could bring in another perspective that could help fortify the views of this dilemma: a medical professional.

Perspective 3

The last perspective surrounding this ethical dilemma is that of the medical professional. For a cosmetic surgeon, there are many factors to look out for when treating a patient and providing them with care. It's important that certain cases be handled with more care in case that a patient has been diagnosed with any potential risk factors, such as mental health diagnoses, before proceeding with an operation.

Within healthcare, a medical professional encounters the Hippocratic Oath. The Hippocratic Oath is an ethical oath sworn by physicians to uphold the ethical standards within

healthcare and provide only the best treatment for their patients. “[A doctor] is expected to use his special knowledge and skill in the most appropriate manner keeping in mind the interest of the patient who has entrusted his life to him... it is expected that a doctor [carries] out necessary investigation or seeks a report from the patient” (M. Pandit and S. Pandit). Along with doing the best they can to treat their patient according to the extent of their own abilities, they will also prevent any harm to their patient. Therefore, if they notice that their patient is exhibiting signs of mental distress that could potentially affect the work done by the surgeon upon the patient, they should also take that into account. It’s important to note that “BDD...occurs in up to one percent of the general population, but appears to be much more prevalent in patients seeking cosmetic surgery...for specific studies among cosmetic surgery patients...[a] seven-percent prevalence rate of BDD [was discovered]” (R. Sansone and L. Sansone). The high correlation rate between BDD and individuals seeking cosmetic surgery highlights the importance of medical professionals when approving which patients to proceed with care.

Another legal issue is medical negligence. This is when the physician does not practice his duties to the full extent. For example, accidentally leaving a surgical tool in a patient’s body after surgery shows that the surgeon was careless. Medical malpractice is another legal issue that medical professionals should be aware of and this occurs when a physician knows the right thing to do but purposely does not do it. Not fully providing consent to an individual or scoping out the individual and their needs is considered malpractice by the law. Essentially, the health professional is held liable by the law and there may be severe consequences for both the patient and the professional if the surgeon does not fully take into account the patient’s well being. This can inadvertently lead the surgeon into committing medical negligence or malpractice, so it’s important to be aware of the signs and symptoms a patient may exhibit.

Beneficence, one of the four ethical principles, is the physician's obligation to do only the best for the patient. However, it may be difficult for cosmetic surgeons to do so if they don't also care for the mental health of the patients. In some cases, operating on patients with mental disorders is beneficence by the physician as that is the best outcome for them and can help. After all it is only when, "...cosmetic surgery can improve the psychological well-being of a patient, then the patient benefits. If the patient truly benefits, then the procedure has been ethically performed" (Goupil). If cosmetic surgeons only care for the physical well-being of their patient and not their mental health, then the physician isn't truly caring for the patient as both mental and physical wellness go hand in hand.

Cosmetic surgery is one of the fields in healthcare with the most malpractice claims by patients. The most obvious reason being this field's invasive nature. Physicians may be drawn to operate on patients for money and not necessarily due to care for the patient. Thus, "...to obtain more income, the profit aspects of the business are highlighted...in light of these trends, the human body, like an inanimate object, material or merchandise is tarnished" (Nejadsarvari, et al). However, qualified and state approved surgeons will follow rules before accepting a patient. Qualified cosmetic surgeons will take steps towards preventing harm to the patient and this may include turning away patients if deemed necessary. "Any qualified surgeon will require all patients over 50, or any patients with medical problems, to undergo a full medical evaluation prior to surgery...and will review the results personally", so there are definitely safeguards in place (Espejo). While the medical professional will be morally ethical, if a patient chooses to withhold important information and it isn't found in the patient's medical records, then the responsibility of a possibly faulty operation would fall upon the patient but result in negative outcomes for both the patient and the surgeon.

To summarize, while there are many safeguards in place that can prevent any mishaps from occurring, medical professionals and cosmetic surgeons especially, need to follow ethical principles to further enhance the safety of their services. As a future healthcare professional, I would want the best for my patients, so even by refusing to provide service, that would be the most responsible option.

Conclusion

Questioning a medical professional's ethical responsibilities in providing and denying cosmetic surgery is an essential topic to approach, especially in the rise of cosmetic surgery all over the world as a result of the globalization of social media and trends. With a new light being shed upon surgical procedures, it will lead to a rise of ethical issues within the field of cosmetic surgery.

The three distinctive stakeholders regarding this dilemma, include the medical professional, the patient, and the mental health providers. While being aware of this topic in mainstream media, I hadn't done enough research on this topic to fully formulate an opinion and understand the nuance that each perspective held. Thus, as an aspiring medical professional, it became my duty to place myself within the roles of each perspective to fully understand this dilemma. While understanding both the medical professional and the mental health provider's point of view in wanting to do the best for the patient despite their own wishes, I was also able to understand the patient's own stance as every individual has their own autonomy and control over the decisions on their body.

After extensive research, I decided that in order to make a decision about this dilemma, I would need to think like a medical professional. This way, I would be able to better prepare and

strengthen my resolve to settle difficult dilemmas in my future career. I have concluded that medical professionals must take full responsibility when choosing to provide or deny care, even if it means going against the patient's wishes. Although there is a huge emphasis placed upon respect for patient autonomy within the healthcare field, it would go against a physician's promise to uphold and do the best thing for their patient. In certain situations, the best way to help a patient may be to deny them care, as it may prove to be gradually damaging.

As I continue to educate myself and form better understandings within the medical field, I must stay true and uphold the responsibilities that I am entrusted with. The research of this ethical dilemma provided me with important insight as to how I should approach a similar situation in the future, fully understanding and acknowledging the nuance to each side. I still have a lot to learn, but realizing my true duty as a medical professional to uphold the law and do the best to benefit my patients will prove to be something that not only I, but other medical professionals in these situations should do.

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