



THE BODY SHOP

AS AMERICA BECOMES A NATION OF NIPS AND TUCKS, DOES A TASTEFUL TWEAK CALL FOR A *DR. 90210*-ESQUE BIG SHOT—OR CAN AN EXPERT UPGRADE BE FOUND AT YOUR LOCAL DOCTOR'S OFFICE? BY MAGGIE BULLOCK

In TV terminology, the Body & Beauty Makeover Expo, a two-day self-improvement smorgasbord that took place last spring at the Valley Forge Convention Center outside of Philadelphia, fell somewhere between *Dr. 90210*, *Fear Factor*, and *The Price is Right*. For a mere \$20 entrance fee, attendees sat in on lectures such as “Eternal Youth” and “Colon Therapy: Hollywood’s Beauty Secret,” gulped sugar-cookie-scented air through plastic tubes at the Aroma-Oxygen Bar, and got face time with the ex-attorney inventor of HotFit SkinnyPants™, a skintight black “Wonderbra for the butt.” They test-drove “organic nano-antennae” LifeWave Energy patches (stick-on disks that purportedly amp up the body’s energy flow and make it burn more fat), and lay beneath igloo-shaped infrared capsules to “invigorate” their cells. Some even allowed aestheticians to tattoo permanent eyeliner in one of “hundreds of thousands of shades” across their lids.

And a lucky few got Restylane injections for free! At 4 P.M., a local ophthalmologist jabbed 15 quick shots (two cc’s) of the hyaluronic-acid filler into the shallow grooves of one woman’s face. “Want some more?” he asked, turning to grin at two local news crews.

“Why not?” she shrugged, though her eyes were tearing. A cosmetic dentist in the crowd turned to his colleague.

“Andrew, we should be doing this stuff!” he said.

If this event is any indication, some of today’s riskiest, most under-researched cosmetic decisions are being made by mild-mannered middle Americans, not collagen-pumped Hollywood extraterrestrials. With the recent democratization and franchising of aesthetic overhauls, injections aren’t just being doled out on conference room floors—they’re also handily available in malls, at home “Botox parties,” in motel rooms,

and, according to some headlines, in unmarked garages. “If you see fillers, peels, anything being advertised very, very cheap, be scared!” says New York dermatologist Rhoda Narins, MD, who points out that invasive treatments aren’t the only procedures that deserve careful forethought—even something as seemingly innocuous as laser hair removal has been known to result in burns and disfigurement.

But beyond the primary issue—safety—the proliferation of readily available quick fixes has also sparked something of an elitist backlash. Though some 5,300 cosmetic surgeons across the country have attained the levels of education, training, and peer review required by the American Board of Plastic Surgery (there are far more than a hundred self-designated boards in this country, but this gold seal of approval is the most essential), a certain deep-pocketed clientele still believes that only a select cadre of specialists can deliver acceptable results—and that price tags are directly proportionate to the level of perfection they can buy. The woman who really has to have Jennifer Aniston’s layered locks can pay top dollar to go to her right-hand man and hairstylist, Chris McMillan. Does the same logic—that you have to spend more to get more—apply when you want her pert little proboscis?

It’s no surprise that most of the big ticket doctors these patients trust view a marketing gimmick like public Restylane shots with the same horror and disdain Michelin-star chefs reserve for fast food. “Ugh,” groans Manhattan dermatologist Ariel Ostad, MD, when told of the Valley Forge fiasco. “Those are not the people you want to go to. I don’t trust a doctor who has to advertise. I look down on that.”

“There are very fine and accomplished surgeons all over the country,” says Upper East Side plastic surgeon Gerald

Pitman, MD, with careful diplomacy. "But there's no question that practice makes perfect. If you want to find someone very experienced in a particular procedure, your probability is higher in a major population center, where there are a lot of people seeking the operation."

When Caroline* of Moneta, Virginia, wanted a tummy tuck to both redefine her waistline and eliminate an unsightly hysterectomy scar, she turned to a Williamsburg, Virginia, surgeon who had been recommended by a friend. But he botched the job, leaving her with even worse scarring and a fierce determination to find exactly the right doctor to correct it. After spending weeks interviewing surgeons throughout Virginia and the Carolinas, she landed in a rarefied place she'd read about in magazines—Pitman's office. "Dr. Pitman immediately made me feel that I was in good hands," she says. His price included a week at a discreet, all-inclusive "home away from home" suite across the street from his office with the option of a round-the-clock nurse; including travel expenses, it was more than \$10,000 above what she would have paid in the South. "Is there any truth in the saying, 'You get what you pay for'? I say yes, definitely. Dr. Pitman gave me exactly what I wanted," Caroline says. "In fact, I've already scheduled an eye job and lower face-lift with him for this spring."

"Higher fees in New York and L.A. aren't about cheating the patient," Ostad says. "A good doctor surrounds himself with better assistants, better nurses, and better technicians. He orders the best equipment and supplies. I have 13 employees. A lesser doctor might have two. So yes, of course, I charge more for a peel."

Topeka, Kansas, native Brenda* has long subscribed to this best-of-the-best strategy. She found the name of a respected, well-known surgeon on an annual, peer-rated list of top doctors in Phoenix three years ago and loved the face-lift he gave her. But last year, when she needed a post-mastectomy tramflap breast restoration—a complex procedure in which fat is moved up from the abdomen and which involves several follow-up procedures, including nipple reconstruction, tattooing on a new areola, and a lift and reduction on the other side for symmetry—she wanted the convenience and comfort of being close to home. "I was skeptical," she confesses. "I kept thinking, There can't be anybody that good in our part of the country." Wisely, Brenda started her search by interviewing all of her Topeka doctors, including her ob-gyn, her oncologist, and her radiologist. (Another clever shopping strategy: Ask the chief of surgery at

your local hospital whom he or she would trust.) Every one of them recommended plastic surgeon Scott Thellman, MD, who practices nearby, in the quaint university town of Lawrence, Kansas. "When I asked how many of these he'd done, he showed me a book full of them. I looked at those ladies and thought, 'Oh my God. If I could look like any one of them I'd be thrilled.' No one was more surprised than me that a great plastic surgeon was right in my own backyard."

"The question is, who are you?" says Minneapolis-based Bruce Cunningham, MD, the president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS). "My clients are schoolteachers and middle-aged men and women. They want a little liposuction to restore their waistlines, not nuclear fission." Obviously, Cunningham scoffs at the idea that getting great results means you have to go to a big-city big shot. "In my practice, breast augmentation costs \$4,000 to \$6,000. In L.A., it's two to three times as much. There might not be any Ming vases in my office, but am I giving a different implant? No. Is the patient any less satisfied? No," he says. "Think about Park Avenue mansions, and the palaces you see on 90210. Somebody's paying for all that bling."

Cunningham readily admits that location makes a big difference in one department: Adventurous, new technologies such as the controversial feather lift "lunchtime facelift" are easier to come by on the coasts, where the competition to be innovative is fierce. "But doing something as it's being introduced instead of after it has been proven successful could go both ways. If it goes well, you're ahead of the curve. If not, who knows?" Cunningham says. "The middle of the country tends to wait and see."

"Where a doctor lives is a lifestyle choice for him or her, as it is for anyone else," says Walter Erhardt, MD, a past president of the ASPS. Twenty-seven years ago, when he opened his practice in Albany, Georgia (pop. 100,000), most of the locals traveled to Atlanta for their nips and tucks. Now they stay closer to home. "A friend of mine in Houston has 75 plastic surgeons in his office building. There are only about six or seven in my whole region, but I'd say I'm equally or more busy than he is. I do more than 100 breast augmentations a year; the implant reps tell me I'm one of their biggest clients in the state." Erhardt has something else in common with his urban counterparts: Disdain for overt salesmanship. "The best marketing is a happy patient with a big mouth," he says. "In a town this size, I can't go anywhere without seeing one of my patients." □

FORGET QUICK FIXES. SAFE, SUCCESSFUL PROCEDURES REQUIRE CAUTIOUS SHOPPING

BOARDING CALL Never assume a doctor is board certified, no matter what her business card says. Both plastic surgeons and dermatologists can be vetted through the American Board of Medical Specialties (www.abms.org), and www.choicetrust.com offers full background checks for \$8.

SPOT CHECK Make sure a doctor's operating room is legally certified, too, at the American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgical Facilities website (www.aaaasf.org).

LIP SERVICE Don't rely solely on word of mouth. One woman who was interviewed for this story said her best friends had no idea she'd had her "rooster neck" lifted at all—or that the original botched job had taken three subsequent surgeries to correct.

ONLINE ALLIES On the other hand, plenty of strangers talk

openly about how everything—from Fraxel to face-lifts—really feels on the review boards at www.yestheyrefake.net.

SMART TALK When interviewing any doctor, ask what he's known for. (Many practices are highly specialized. Don't go to a nose man for a boob job.) How many does he perform a year? Ask to see photos. "Is he or she really listening to you?" Cunningham asks. "You want someone who will deal with and work through possible problems or complications."

FAR AND AWAY If you do decide to travel, plan on making multiple trips for pre- and post-op consultations; being long distance can make after-the-fact corrections more complicated.

STAYING POWER Before scheduling, make sure the doctor will be in town for at least a week after your procedure to resolve any problems that may arise in the initial healing phase.