BY RONALD E. GOLDSTEIN, DDS

Choosing DR. RIGHT

Cosmetic surgery is both an art and a science.

The past decade has brought dramatic advances in the esthetic sciences that few can ignore, especially with the media's constant coverage of the topic. Turn a page or change a channel and you're likely to see an ad for a procedure or product that promises eternal beauty. The focus is on everything from creases to negative and socially taboo flaws that, we are led to believe, can change lives as well as faces and bodies.

BUYER BEWARE

The decision to pursue an esthetic treatment is a touch one and shouldn't be decided quickly or without forethought. And choosing a doctor can be even tougher.

It's little wonder that the news is filled with stories of patients being harmed by sub-par health "professionals." Even more astonishing is that sometimes the offender is not even licensed to practice a medical or dental specialty. Unless accurately for patients, false credentials are not that difficult to come by.

To make matters worse, few websites are monitored for accuracy by governing boards. This leaves the discerning work to other practitioners and consumers to report when they believe are dishonest claims. But identifying potential problems can be extremely difficult for anyone when a physician or dentist presents misleading or fraudulent information.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

How can you use this information to protect yourself or your loved ones from an unscrupulous person claiming he or she is the answer to your esthetic needs? Start by doing your homework. Research is the key to success and is a vital component in the selection process. If you're considering a plastic surgeon, start by confirming that he or she is board-certified.

Dr. Farzad Nahai, an Atlanta-based plastic surgeon, says on-line information is important, but should be used with caution. "The Internet is a great tool, but some poor information. The surgeon's own website is a good start but is only part of the picture."

Be you read and learn, beware of slick advertisements that appear to ignore risks and guarantee results. Since there is no board certification for cosmetic dentistry, for example, judge experience by evidence of success. Websites from accredited associations can be helpful. However, New York dentist Dr. Stephen Chu says that individual practitioners' sites can be quite biased as they are aimed more at marketing than information. Also, look cautiously at the titles of "so-called schools and others that may exhibit you regarding the degrees each grad that acts of their graduates. Favorite appointments at university-based dental or medical schools are also good indicators that the university has looked favorably at the credentials of the dentist or physician.

DON'T HESITATE TO ASK!

Learn all you can about the practice before you sit for a consultation. Atlanta-based plastic surgeon Dr. Theresa Jerome advises her patients to ask for referrals from friends who have been pleased with work they've had done. It's also important to get the names of doctors whose work was not well received, she adds. She advises: "Treat everyone's advice just as one opinion, not as fact because many people in the beauty and health industry have working relationships or referral systems."

Questions are a patient's best friend. Suggests Dr. Nahai, "A patient should ask how often the surgeon performs a particular procedure, what the alternatives are to the procedure, as well as the risks to the procedure. It is also important to know how long the recovery is expected to be." Dr. Brian Mahoney, an Atlanta plastic surgeon, also recommends asking what type of exam a doctor specializes in and the full range of options.

Among other questions Dr. Mahoney recommends: "What complications have you seen with this procedure?" "Do you have hospital privileges for class procedures?" and "What is your policy

Three plastic surgery societies that can provide accurate, up-to-date and unbiased information about plastic surgery are: The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery at www.surgery.org, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons at www.plasticsurgery.org and the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at www.aafprs.org.

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CHOOSING DR. RIGHT CAN BE A MAJOR PROBLEM FOR MOST PATIENTS UNLESS YOU DO YOUR HOMEWORK AND KNOW WHICH QUESTIONS TO ASK.

if change do not go as expected?" He also advises inquiring if the doctor has ever been sued for malpractice or has any cases pending. However, you may not be able to find out this information if the doctor has had failures, but worded with the answer by answering his or her questions.

Also, make sure you have a good understanding of the procedure you are considering, another helpful against by consumer practitioners. I have always enjoyed working with patients who are knowledgeable about what constitutes good functional and esthetic dentistry. Dr. Jerome agrees. "This should be considered an interview process. There is a certain amount of homework each patient must do, it restores confidence with one's choice."

Others Dr. Nahai, "I encourage patients to ask questions, take home the materials we provide, and to return for a second visit before making a final decision."

Don't hesitate to seek consultations with physicians and dentists until you find the best match. Keeping in mind that both science and artistry will definitely play roles in a successful outcome. Dr. Chu considers second opinions helpful, but not always necessary and points that "more than one opinion is often confusing." Dr. Nahai agrees. "If a patient really feels at ease with the first surgeon they went and they are comfortable, then perhaps one consult is enough. Having said that, a second opinion can provide patient with more options and perhaps clarify further any previously made recommendations."

THESE QUALITIES REALLY COUNT

What questions should you look for in your cosmetic dentist or plastic surgeon? Dr. Chu enumerates three basics: "Knowledge, artistry, honesty and integrity." For Dr. Mahoney, clinical competence should provide the first level of selection. He also points to community compassion and passion for the work.

Plastic surgery is an evolving specialty. With that in mind, Dr. Jerome recommends choosing a physician who stays up to date on the latest techniques and options. "Assuming nothing is unjust, you need to find a surgeon who makes you feel comfortable saying what specifically bothers you and what concerns you to see what doesn't bother you."

Since cosmetic surgery is both an art and a science, there will remain the possibility that your esthetic results will not meet your expectations. "Even with properly performed surgery, revisions may be necessary," according to Dr. Jerome. In such cases, it was recommended for this article again that one should return to the doctor who performed the procedure. Closely explain your concerns, and come to an agreement on a plan for correction.

Dr. Mahoney suggests that concerns can be expressed in a letter if communicating them face-to-face seems daunting. Dr. Nahai advises patients who may have lost confidence in their surgeon to seek a second opinion regarding additional options.

CHOOSE YOUR TEAMMATES CAREFULLY

Ideally, the specialist you select will become a team player committed to your well-being. "I tell patients that they should use their choice of physician as price," advises Dr. Nahai. I would add that, when it comes to esthetics, the artistic skills, clinical training and years of experience of the practitioner should be major determinants in your selection. After all, there's a great deal at stake and you deserve nothing less the best results.

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