

The elixir of youth

Older people want to look good for their age and slow the fading process. **By Muriel Reddy**

Gravity – it’s a killer, at least emotionally. Reach a certain age and the face and body begin their desperate dash south. The skin on the face shrivels, the eyes droop, jowls sag, and wrinkles, once kindly described as emblems of a life well-lived, are now furrows on a face in full decline. It’s scary stuff.

We live in an increasingly image-conscious age where youth and beauty are not just celebrated but considered a currency. Yeats was right – that is no country for old men. This may explain why women and men in middle age and beyond are deciding in greater numbers to seek asylum from the ravages of time through surgery and less invasive procedures such as fillers, and collagen shots.

Rather than contemplate a future characterised by dentures, replacement hips or new knees, they’re embracing a force that will not stop the clock on ageing but will, at least, slow it down. This reprieve is giving them back their groove. The miracles of surgery have finally laid to rest that old adage that what can’t be cured must be endured.

Surgery has come a long way since those early days when the Bride of Wildenstein had one stretch and stitch too many and became the universal poster girl for cosmetic surgery gone mad. There are still cases of excess today – witness the rise in penis enlargement and designer vaginas – but physically improving yourself through surgery is now an acceptable option in society.

In some circles, it’s a moral imperative. The use of to relax lines and wrinkles has become so ubiquitous that, as Simon Cowell rightly observed, it’s no more unusual than toothpaste. Yes, this elixir of youth in all its forms – fillers, collagen and surgery – is bringing the X factor back into the lives of people.

It’s tempting to suggest that the mirror has fuelled the cosmetic surgery boom but as Brighton-based plastic surgeon Dr Alan Breidahl explains, it goes far deeper than that, particularly with older patients. “People are living longer and more healthily than ever before,” he says. “They are also a lot fitter and they want to look the way they feel. They want their appearance to reflect the sense of vitality they feel.”

Unlike younger generations demanding the lips of Angelina Jolie or the cheekbones of Charlize

Theron, people in middle and older age tend to be more realistic in their expectations. They simply want to look younger, or at least look like a firmer and better version of themselves. “When you are 50, 40 seems very young,” says Dr Breidahl. There’s also the pressure to remain competitive in the workplace and that is fuelling a surge in procedures. “It’s certainly a driver for men,” he adds.

This is especially so for the baby boomers now confronted by the evidence of ageing heaving into full view in the mirror. “It happens to coincide with a time of increased competition in the workplace,” explains Dr Chris Moss, a Toorak-based plastic surgeon.

He says the number of Australian men undergoing procedures is growing at a rate of 10 per cent a year. The most popular procedures are facial plastic surgery and liposuction. Men tend to dip their toes in the surgical pond by trying or fillers and then, feeling more comfortable with the concept, move on to surgery. Dr Moss believes the ubiquity of social media and its concentration on images means people are more anxious than ever to look as good as they possibly can.

There’s a huge interest at the moment in fat cell grafting where fat is harvested from the patient’s own body, purified, and then injected into those areas of the face that have deflated. Dr Moss says treatments are growing at a rate of 20 per cent and are often complementary to a facelift.

Dr Bryan Mendelson believes that good quality plastic surgery can turn back the clock by up to seven years



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and it can also slow down the rate of future ageing. Contrary to popular belief, vanity is not the sole motivator. “A lot of people say, ‘I don’t mind growing older but I hate growing untidy,’” explains Dr Mendelson. “My oldest facelift patient is 88.”

He believes the optimum time to consider a facelift is when you are looking tired but not old. Why? “When you operate on patients who look tired, surgery makes them look fresher. It helps to restore their fading appearance.”

Typically, people bring in photos of themselves, taken at a time when they felt comfortable with how they looked. “Most say they don’t want to look age inappropriate,” says Dr Moss. “They just want to look good for their age.” It’s really about subtle rejuvenation.

Secrecy still shrouds surgery. Although all the patients interviewed for this story insisted on remaining anonymous, Dr Moss believes there has been a greater acceptance in society of cosmetic procedures. “It’s outdated to think that taking pride in your appearance is necessarily vain. It’s a reality and a fact of life. People don’t judge others who might spend \$20,000 to \$30,000 on crowns or bridge work.” ■



CASE STUDY 1

Providing food for the soul

Brigid describes her face and necklifts as medicine for the soul. The journey that culminated in her surgical makeover under the skillful hands of Dr Chris Moss began decades ago when she was kicked in the face by a horse.

Although the injury healed, it left underlying scar tissue and, as she began to grow older, the droop on the left side of her face became more pronounced.

“When you see my before photos, it’s obvious that I was experiencing some premature ageing,” explains the 47-year-old. “I was looking fatigued and my skin had lost its elasticity and lustre. I had grown

up in Queensland and just being out and about in the sun had played a part in that.”

She was both nervous and tentative about going under the surgeon’s scalpel and shopped around before investing her confidence and hope in Dr Moss. She is delighted with his work. “The most notable difference is that my skin looks firmer and my face looks more even. My eyes stand out more. I feel more alive. I really do like the reflection I’m seeing in the mirror ... People say I look 10 years younger.”

Brigid chooses to remain anonymous because, like most people, she doesn’t want to be judged. “I don’t understand people

who do that. I feel joyous that I was able to do what I did and I would recommend it to anyone. The only advice I would offer is to choose your surgeon well. This is not something to be ashamed of. Medical science has come so far and I see it as a support system for me.”

She took her first peek at her new face as soon as she regained consciousness. “I wasn’t bandaged,” she recalls. “I had some drainage tubes connected to me but that was it. I was nervous about looking at myself in the mirror that first time but I was very impressed. Wow, I thought, I’m so glad I did it!” ■

The top 10 most common plastic surgical procedures in Australia are:

- Breast augmentation
- Breast mastopexy
- Breast reduction
- Face lift
- Ear surgery
- Rhinoplasty
- Eyelid surgery
- Liposuction
- Abdominoplasty
- Body lift

Courtesy: The Australian Society of Plastic Surgery.