

PLASTIC SURGERY IS BRAIN SURGERY.

BY MARK CONSTANTIAN, MD

Thirty years ago, a plastic surgeon applying for New Hampshire hospital privileges would be examined like a racehorse at an auction. At the time, there were almost no female physicians in the area, and even fewer in administrative positions. The examiner would tip his chair back so that its front feet lifted off the floor and fold his arms across his chest, and shaking his head, he would say, "We just don't need anybody to do facelifts."



BEFORE

Part of the reason that plastic surgery practices have continued to grow in our area stems from the fact that plastic surgery encompasses much more than just facelifts. Many surgeons focus on one area such as hand surgery for accidents, arthritis, and nerve or tendon problems. Others focus on many areas including the treatment of facial injuries, burns, and congenital anomalies; breast reconstruction after mastectomy; and, yes, cosmetic surgery.



AFTER

The common thread in all of these surgical problems is deformity. Even in the hand, where it might not be as obvious, the sense of deformity can be profound. Captain Hook didn't have a hook for a hand by accident—the deformity accentuated his evil ways. Movie villains don't have obvious facial scars

by accident. Stories about the ugly stepsisters, the beautiful princess, and the one-armed man imprint us all with ideas about beauty, for better or for worse. Added to that mix is "body image," the mental health professional's term for the way each of us feels we ought to look. It is no wonder that the plastic surgeon's need to understand motivation can be so complex and so terribly important.

It is perhaps most obvious in nasal surgery that ideas about beauty mix with the goal of creating a pretty or handsome nose that works well, while recognizing the need to preserve or erase important familial or ethnic traits. One patient, a tall, graceful man who was an international marathon runner for Kenya, came to see

a plastic surgeon after an unsuccessful rhinoplasty that had produced a tiny nose. He brought photographs of his father and brother, whose noses were larger and wider. "I don't look like my family any more." For this man, the solution was a reconstruction that restored his sense of identity.

In many cases the solution isn't so unconventional, but eradicating or reducing the sense of deformity defines plastic surgery, and deformity is the missing link that prevents much of the popular press, and even some other physicians, from understanding the specialty. Experienced plastic surgeons can get regular calls from national magazines for interviews about "plastic surgery addicts" or patients with distorted body image. Unfortunately, the editors will never permit the surgeon to review the story before it goes to press. Without protection from editorial misrepresentation, the popular magazines are capable of making the patients seem odd.

Many "before" and "after" photographs used to teach surgeons in continuing education courses prompt questions such as, "What did you do to her eyes?" The answer is, usually, "Nothing." And yet the question is understandable because the difference in the patients' facial expressions is often striking. Although the surgical focus may have been the nose, the healing effect is much wider, and reveals changes in the way patients perceive themselves after successful surgery. It is one of the most gratifying aspects of plastic surgery. Beauty is more than skin deep.

As many patients and their surgeons learn, plastic surgery is brain surgery.

Dr. Constantian maintains his private practice at 19 Tyler Street in Nashua. He has just completed a single-author textbook - Rhinoplasty: Craft & Magic - that will be available to physicians this coming May. He is also the author of 24 book chapters and 60 published papers. Dr. Constantian, and his wife Charlotte, reside in Hollis, New Hampshire. For more information call 603-880-7700 or go to www.drconstantian.com.

