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A new wrinkle

Dermatologists Are Making Deeper Cuts Into The Domain Of Cosmetic Surgery

BY CARA BUCKLEY
cbukley@herald.com



The sucking sound fills the room, a menacing hiss. The patient, supine on an operating table, eyes the doctor calmly as she prepares to mine the fat from his belly, swollen now with four liters of anesthetic lined with black felt pen like a topographic map.

"It's an elegant procedure. Like playing the violin," says Dr. Helena Igra, a dermatologist and cosmetic surgeon based in Miami Beach.

Igra fiddles with the source of the hiss, a cannula, which resembles a knitting needle with holes, and pushes it through an incision in the patient's stomach, quickly weaving back and forth. The skin tents. There's a gurgle, then a swish. Fat appears in the cannula's tube, looking exactly, as Igra notes, "like chicken fat in a blender," and steadily makes its way to an attached, sealed jar.

'ELEGANT PROCEDURE' Miami Beach dermatologist Helena Igra, left, says that performing liposuction is like "playing a violin." Cosmetic surgeons performed \$3 billion worth of liposuction procedures last year.

PLEASE SEE DERMATOLOGY, 2E

'There's enough to go around. Unfortunately, the plastic surgeons feel threatened by us.'

DR. HELENA IGRA
DERMATOLOGIST AND
COSMETIC SURGEON

Liposuction Method Promises less pain

Procedure done with patient awake

BY CARA BUCKLEY
cbukley@herald.com

Dr. Helena Igra's patient opted for tumescent liposuction because it promises a quick recovery and minimal bruising. No one would know except for his wife, and, besides, she had her saddlebags and thighs done a year ago, right there in Dr. Igra's office.

Not bad for \$1,300 a piece, roughly on par with what a plastic surgeon would charge.

"Patients that come to see us don't

want major surgery or major scars," said Igra, a member of several medical organizations, including the American Medical Association, American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery and the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery. "Traditional liposuction usually involves general anaesthesia, more bleeding and swelling, and wall to wall bruising. That's why it hurts."

The defining feature of tumescent liposuction is its use of large amounts of a fluid, a mixture of lidocaine, which numbs, and epinephrine, which constricts blood vessels, that is pumped by the liter into the target area. The cannulas used in tumescent lipo are thinner too, and draw much of the fluid out along with the fat.

The patient also gets to watch, because the anesthesia is local. By

Florida guidelines, passed in 2000 after a spate of plastic-surgery deaths, a maximum of 3 liters of fat, roughly six pounds, can be taken out at one time.

As Igra hastens to note, the deaths happened when patients were under general anesthetic and having more than one procedure, such as a tummy tuck combined with liposuction exceeding 3 liters, performed at once.

Tumescent liposuction, however, has never caused any recorded fatalities, and was developed by a dermatologist, Jeffrey Klein, for the express purpose of increasing liposuction's safety.

"Dermatologists use local anesthesia, and are gentle because they deal with people who are awake," Klein said. "It's a non-threatening environment."

The patient may feel "like a water balloon" now, but in three hours, two fewer liters of fat will occupy his body, and he'll be able to hop off the table, saunter out of her office and head straight home. Like increasing numbers of people nationwide—some 814,000 last year, up 20 percent from the year before—this man, a 54-year-old engineer from Miami who wished to remain anonymous, has chosen a dermatologist over a plastic surgeon to do away with stubborn pockets of fat. He wanted a quick fix for his blossoming belly and love handles, what Igra describes as "genetic, diet-resistant, exercise-resistant fat." According to noted cosmetic surgeons, the surge in demand for their services has sparked an anxious outcry from plastic surgeons, who usually perform heavy-duty surgeries like face-lifts, or facial reconstruction. "There's enough to go around," said Igra.

"Unfortunately, the plastic surgeons feel threatened by us."

INCREASING NUMBERS

Cosmetic surgeons include dermatologists, maxillofacial surgeons, ophthalmologists and ear, nose and throat doctors who are specially trained in cosmetic, not plastic surgery. Along with performing \$3 billion worth of liposuction procedures last year, cosmetic surgeons also administer increasing numbers of "lunchtime" procedures like Botox, which erases wrinkles by freezing muscles. Last year, some 914,484 people opted for Botox, known as the "five minute face-lift," a 25 percent increase.

The numbers, cosmetic surgeons said, have compelled some plastic surgeons to begin nipping at their heels.

"There's rancor between plastic surgeons and everyone else doing cosmetic surgery, whether it's a general surgeon, an ob-gyn, dermatologist, ophthalmologist or maxillofacial surgeon," said Dr. Douglas Dedo, a facial cosmetic surgeon who practices in Palm Beach and the former president of the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery. "Even though plastic surgeons learned tumescent liposuction from dermatologists, and maxillofacial surgery from maxillofacial surgeons."

"Plastic surgeons' discontent," Dedo said, "manifests itself in an array of defamation, ranging from plastic surgeons trying to run cosmetic surgeons out of town, to cautionary remarks about in-office procedures, to advertisements cautioning readers to trust only board-certified plastic surgeons. Cosmetic surgeons said the rift's root is economic."

"The nice thing about non-invasive procedures is that they work well," said Dr. Marty Zaiac, a Miami-based dermatologist who runs an office on the privately owned Fisher Island. "We definitely prolong the need for people to have face-lifts."

"INVASIVE" WORK
Dr. Frank Luce, President of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons and chief of plastic surgery at University Hospital in



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- HELENA IGRA, dermatologist

Cleveland, Ohio, said his association is concerned mainly when cosmetic surgeons perform invasive procedures, like face-lifts, cosmetic eye lifts and breast surgery.

"I don't think we can stand and say that another discipline can't perform nonsurgical procedures," Luce said. Plastic surgeons inject Botox and collagen too, but at a fraction of the rate of dermatologists. "The difficulties arise with true invasive procedures. The position of organized plastic surgery is that the performance of those procedures requires a background and a foundation in formal surgical training." Luce said it was perfectly acceptable for dermatologists to perform nonsurgical procedures like tumescent liposuction. Dermatologists, however, said the public is still getting a strong message that liposuction is dangerous, even though the tumescent method has never been reported to have caused a death. "It's a misrepresentation we're trying to fight," Igra said. Turf war aside, more cosmetic surgeons and plastic surgeons

appear to be working hand in hand. Plastic surgeons who perform eye lifts often refer patients to dermatologists for Botox, and vice versa.

SHARING SPACE

"I received a letter six months ago from a plastic surgeon in Aventura asking for a dermatologist to share space with," said Igra. "That's how it should be. They do their thing and we do our thing. There's a crossover and healthy patients." Luce and Dedo agree the patient pie is big enough, and widening. Baby boomers are seeking alternate ways to deal with their thickening midriffs. And more people are seeking to erase history from their faces at younger ages, such as recent patients of Igra's, both in their 20s, who arrived for Botox shots just before their wedding. Procedures like Botox are often gateways to future surgical work, like face-lifts and implants.

As for Igra's lipo patient, the engineer, he arrived for a check up two days after his procedure glowing and slimmer. Sure, he had to sit in a bathtub after the surgery to allow leftover fluid to drain out. Sure, he has to wear a padded girdle for the next three weeks.

But he doesn't regret a thing. In fact, he feels blessed. "This is the best present I ever gave myself," he said, his mouth spread into a Cheshire grin.

Helena Igra, M.D.
Board Certified in Dermatology
Cosmetic Surgery

Specialist in Safe Lipo Liposuction