

Skin Deep : A Face From an Infomercial

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It used to be that a cosmetic surgery patient who was tired of sagging jowls would discreetly ask for names of reputable doctors who did face-lifts. A surgeon, building a practice as word of mouth about his skills spread, became, in effect, his own brand.

But now face-lifts themselves are being branded. Certain minimally invasive procedures are marketed directly to patients in a one-size-fits-most approach. Patients pick an operation — usually after seeing it touted online, on TV or in magazines — and are referred by a national organization to a doctor.

Two procedures sold this way are the Lifestyle Lift, which an ad in Family Circle describes as “revolutionary” and a way to “remove wrinkles, frown lines and sagging skin” in about an hour; and the QuickLift, which also benefits from nationwide marketing that promotes a short recovery and only local anesthesia.

Because these procedures, priced at \$4,000 and \$5,900, contrast with more extensive face-lifts requiring general anesthesia and usually costing more, they have become popular: More than 100,000 patients have received the Lifestyle Lift alone since 2001, according to the company.

But some surgeons think branded face-lifts are problematic. It is not the procedures themselves that disturb critics — many plastic surgeons and otolaryngologists (head and neck surgeons) offer their own quick-recovery face-lifts. But some doctors are concerned that patients may be so persuaded by advertising that they don’t seek a second opinion or investigate the full range of options. Consumers may pick a minimally invasive procedure when the results they seek may require more complex — and expensive — intervention.

“What’s new is this is plastic surgery being marketed to the public as a widget,” said Dr. Brian Reagan, a plastic surgeon in San Diego. “People are buying, so buyer beware.”

In this new landscape, patients are encouraged to seek an advertised procedure rather than work with a surgeon to select from a menu of options. “What’s more, some patients are now “looking not for the best doctor, but the one who has the magic wand,” said Dr. Reagan, who has given a lecture titled “Invasion of the Mini-Lifts ... Coming to a Clinic Near You.”

Dr. David M. Kent, an osteopath and facial plastic surgeon who founded Lifestyle Lift, said he employs nearly 100 doctors in 31 offices who are trained to do Lifestyle Lifts. (The company also has 10 doctors in private practice who license its brand.) “Every single patient gets the same basic face-lift,” he said, explaining that it consists of lifting underlying layers of muscle and connective tissue, and trimming skin. Patients also receive custom nips and tucks as needed.

The QuickLift, which roughly 10,000 patients have had since 2003, is sold differently. Doctors who offer it maintain their own practices and might also offer traditional face-lifts. A company, MDCommunications, helps those physicians market the QuickLift by placing television spots and optimizing how fast a doctor is found online.

Dr. Dominic A. Brandy, the developer of the QuickLift, coined the term to describe his adaptation of an S-lift, an operation that uses teardrop-shaped sutures to suspend sagging features. Dr. Brandy said he improved on the S-lift by pulling the face vertically instead of toward the ears.

Currently, 25 to 30 doctors receive patients through QuickLiftMd.com. The doctors attended a one-day workshop priced at \$1,950 (and sometimes a few other days of training) taught by Dr. Brandy, a cosmetic surgeon with a background in emergency medicine.

Teresa Bradley, 47, found her QuickLift

surgeon on the company's site. Even before meeting him, she had decided QuickLift was for her. "I researched the procedure," she said. "It was excellent." But she has agonized over the results. "He lifted one side very high and left the other side hanging," she said.

Now Ms. Bradley said she realizes the QuickLift is only as good as the surgeon doing it.

In response, Dr. Brandy said, "When you teach somebody a procedure, even if they use the basic same procedure, skill levels are so different."

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons hasn't taken a stand on branded procedures. But its president, Dr. John W. Canady, advised, "Go get a second opinion from someone who doesn't have a big ad."

Patients should be presented with a range of options, said Dr. David S. Kung, a board-certified plastic surgeon in the Washington, D.C., area. He considers deeper-plane face-lifts "the gold standard," because they "last the longest and they can effect the maximal change," he said. But he sees a place for middle-of-the-spectrum face-lifts, which in his opinion, include the QuickLift, Lifestyle Lift and another (nonbranded) lift, the minimal access cranial suspension.

Dr. Kent said that before patients meet a Lifestyle Lift surgeon, they see a consultant and watch a video in which the company's medical director explains its philosophy. Then they meet with a surgeon before deciding whether to proceed.

But three Lifestyle Lift patients and Dr. Mario S. Yco, a board-certified otolaryngologist who was an employee of the company for about a year, said that patients were urged to put down a deposit before they met with a surgeon.

"The consultant sold the surgery," said Dr. Yco, who practices in Encinitas, Calif. Often by the time he saw patients, the surgery was booked. "There were many patients I had to cancel," he said, explaining that he didn't deem them appropriate candidates.

In response, Dr. Kent said, "It's never a consultant that decides whether or not a patient should have surgery." He described the company's consultants as "people-friendly people." They make sure patients "understand what they are getting into, explain the things we offer, talk about the doctor," he said.

Dr. Yco said he was amazed at the power that advertising had over Lifestyle Lift patients. "They are sold by the concept, they are not sold by the surgeon's credentials," he said. "Unfortunately if they are not satisfied, it's a big drop for them." He added, "It's like lemmings going down a cliff."

In May, on the job site Monster.com, the Manhattan branch of Lifestyle Lift ran an ad seeking applicants to be plastic surgery consultants. "No medical experience needed," it said, adding that the right candidate would have an "ability to match the offerings of Lifestyle Lift with the desires of Clients."

Sharron Bryant, a manager for Lindt Chocolates in Dallas, who got a Lifestyle Lift in 2007, said she had a "high pressure" consultation and put down a deposit before meeting a surgeon. Ms. Bryant, then 59, paid \$6,100 for a Lifestyle Lift and chin liposuction. She never needed pain medication during her weeklong recovery, she said.

But she disliked the loose skin that remained on her jowls and neck. "I got nothing for the money," she said. She later paid \$8,200 for a traditional face-lift from a different surgeon.

With "every plastic surgery procedure, there's a certain number of people afterwards that are unhappy," Dr. Kent said. "There's nothing wrong with them medically. They are just dissatisfied."

On Realself.com, a Web site where patients discuss cosmetic surgery, 37 percent of the 170 people who reviewed the Lifestyle Lift said the procedure was "worth it," while 63 percent didn't think so.

Leigh Floyd, 46, a technical writer in Houston, is an "extremely satisfied" customer of Lifestyle Lift, which she partly attributed to her realistic expectations. "You won't look 20" afterward, she said, "because it's still your 40-year-old skin."

But she was most impressed by the skill of her surgeon, Dr. Kevin R. Smith, a Houston otolaryngologist. "His sutures were so tiny," she said. "I just know I picked the right doctor."

Here's some advice for those considering face-lifts.

- Check

whether your surgeon is certified by one of the boards of the American Board of Medical Specialties at abms.org. They require physicians to complete residency training in a specialty and to pass rigorous oral and written exams.

- Before you schedule an operation, meet the

surgeon to make sure you're on the same page. "The best surgeons will give you their honest opinion whether they can achieve what you're looking for," said Dr. John W. Canady, the president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

- Don't settle for a hasty

consultation. The downside as well as the upside of an operation should be covered, said Dr. Robert Singer, a plastic surgeon in La Jolla, Calif.

- You should never feel as if you're being sold a

procedure. "If you're getting a high-pressure sales pitch for a procedure, personally that would worry me," Dr. Canady said.

- It never hurts to get a second opinion.