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Plastic Surgery: Certification focuses on safety

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Plastic Surgery

There have been a couple of widely reported deaths in the last few months in patients who have had cosmetic surgery. One was the mother of Kanye West, a rap artist, and the other a teenage girl who had breast augmentation in Florida. These sort of events send a chill through anyone facing surgery, and a big chill through the innards of plastic surgeons. Why did these events occur and what can we learn from them?

Donde West, the rapper's mom, underwent a combination of a belt lipectomy and a breast augmentation. A belt lipectomy is like a tummy tuck but goes all the way around the body, like a lower body "lift." The two procedures took about six hours, and she was discharged home that evening. Although she was up and around that evening, she complained of chest pains and shortness of breath the next day. She apparently suffered a cardiac arrest that evening and died. An autopsy showed coronary artery disease. There were no apparent surgical mistakes. Her surgeon, a Dr. Adams, had been featured on "Oprah."

West was 58 years old and had a history of hypertension. Her sister had died of a heart attack. West was described in the coroner's report as a borderline diabetic. She was African-American, and she was obese. She did not receive a preoperative clearance from an internist, and had no preoperative stress testing or cardiac evaluation.

One of the constant themes in board examinations when you want to

be certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery is safety. When you take the oral examination, you are in a room with three very mean examiners who have all trained at Guantanamo Bay. Besides applying electric current to your teeth and pliers to your eyelids, there are many, many interrogations about patient safety. For instance, they will give you a scenario such as "a 58-year-old African-American female with hypertension, borderline diabetes, and a family history of sudden cardiac death wants a tummy tuck," and if you don't say, "the first thing I would do is ask for a stress test from her internist," it is straight to the waterboard. You flunk. Board exams are not about how you put in breast implants or suck fat. They are about seeing if you are a safe surgeon.

Well, Oprah's boy was not board-certified. Somewhere along the line he didn't jump the hoops. Yeah, he is good-looking and advertises a lot and he was on "Oprah." But was he well-versed in preoperative assessment of risk? Was he really thinking about the advisability of doing a big combo procedure and sending the lady home that night? I can tell you those board examiners think a lot about that stuff, and they think about what they can do to you if you don't know it.

What about the girl in Florida? She had what appeared to be an uneventful breast augmentation, and then developed malignant hyperthermia, which is a condition where a patient who has undergone general anesthesia develops a very high temperature and severe changes in metabolism. It is very rare, and the cause unclear, but it can be treated with large doses of a drug called dantrolene. Unfortunately, this facility didn't have enough dantrolene. This surgical facility did not have a bombproof procedure for dealing with malignant hyperthermia.

Although both of these procedures were cosmetic, these disasters could have happened with any type of surgery. So what do we learn?

To help evaluate the quality and safety of outpatient surgical centers, find out if the facility is licensed by your state or accredited by a national accrediting body such as the American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgical Facilities, the Joint Commission (formerly the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations) or the Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health

Care. Any amount of outside vetting is better than none. Although these agencies are pretty malignant and picky, and I have been sorely tempted on more than one occasion to strangle these people, they do keep you honest. (Making me tuck my ponytail in is a bit extreme.) They are the ones that find out if you have a plan for everything.

Don't be fooled by glitz. Cosmetic surgery is filled with hucksters, and because it is a cash business, everyone and their Lhaso Apso wants in. Interestingly, I have no competition when it comes to pressure sores on the backside. Hmmm. Make sure your surgeon is board-certified, and certified in the field you need. Three separate surgical boards have certified me, but you don't want me doing your brain tumor, for instance. Don't be afraid to ask your surgeon about facility accreditation, board certification, results, complications, mad patients and secrets regarding personal animal magnetism.

Complications and death can occur with surgery. Fortunately, they are very rare, but patients need to help manage that risk. Check it out. If a doctor is defensive or evasive, find another. And it looks like they will be needing a replacement on "Oprah," so stay tuned.

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