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Young under the knife

Tom Blackwell, National Post · Sept. 10, 2011 | Last Updated: Sept. 10, 2011 5:09 AM ET

Nicole Goldstein was just 17, finished high school and about to start community college, when she took a deep breath, dreaming of through years of cruel taunting, and finally had her plus-sized nose surgically transformed.

Her older sister underwent a nose job at the same time, and Ms. Goldstein said she knows many other similar operations recently while in high school or college. At clinics across the country, meanwhile, doctors are performing operations to fix protruding ears on even younger children - some barely out of kindergarten - a surprising and contentious phenomenon.

Doctors say they see a sharp spike at this time of year in the number of young aesthetic-surgery patients who have their operation and heal in time for the return to class, be it in Grade 1 or first-year university.

One British Columbia cosmetic surgeon even recommends children get such work done as early in life as possible to benefit from their new, improved look. In Ontario, the ear surgery is covered by the province's medical insurance until 18 years old.

"The idea behind doing it at an early age ... is we want them to enjoy the advantages," said Dr. Tom Buonassisi, a plastic surgery specialist. "If they have a very, very prominent feature ... it helps them emotionally at an early age."

Others, however, call the trend a particularly disturbing symbol of an image-obsessed era, arguing that beauty should conform to narrow definitions of beauty, rather than embrace imperfection.

Nevertheless, Dr. Buonassisi said he sees a spike of about 30% in the number of child and teenage patients at his surgery clinic this time of year. Dr. Philip Solomon, a Toronto facial cosmetic and reconstructive surgeon, also sees a similar seasonal bump, noting that he had done nose jobs on five teenagers heading off to university over the summer.

Over the course of the year he said he operates on more than 100 teenagers and 50 younger children, but the cosmetic surgery market that has seen patients come to him from an increasingly broad range of demographics.

About 60 to 70% of the cosmetic ear operations Dr. Buonassisi does are on children under 10, he said.

Ms. Goldstein, now 19, said her large nose seemed out of proportion with her petite body, and "all three of her parents were about getting the hated proboscis made smaller."

"Kids are really mean, and a lot of people did comment on it," said the recent graduate of the fashion program at York University's Brown College. "I'm so much happier; I have so much more self-confidence. I think it was the best thing I ever did."

Rhinoplasty, or nose reshaping, can be performed once the nose has stopped growing - about age 14-15, according to plastic surgeons. Otoplasty, the ear operation, is done as early as age five, by which time the appendage has stopped growing.

parents come in to talk to Dr. Buonassisi about operating on children when they are just three or four to come back in a couple of years. Young children are put under general anesthetic for both procedure

Sometimes, teenage girls show up on their own, asking for the procedures without their parents' know dilemma to surgeons, said Dr. Solomon.

With elementary-school-age youngsters, the motive is typically a self-consciousness about ears that sti unwanted focus of attention, said Dr. Buonassisi. As often as not with those children, it is the parents r anxious to get the work done, having had unpleasant experiences themselves with the same inherited i

In Ontario, the provincial government picks up the \$500 fee for the ear reshaping operation on childr cosmetic procedure covered by medicare, said Dr. Solomon. Work on "outstanding ears" is listed unde deformities" in the province's medical fee schedule.

If previous generations felt slightly sheepish about admitting to undergoing cosmetic work, adolescent their operations, even sometimes posting before-and-after photographs on their Facebook page, Dr. S inspired others to consider surgery.

Teenage girls are also influenced by news of celebrities getting work done, he said, such as the 20-som reportedly had a nose job in 2006.

"When that became widespread information to the public in media like People magazine, I had an ups saying 'I want a nose like Ashlee Simpson,' " Dr. Solomon recalled. "They'll come in with a picture of [1 Kardashian, liking her lips, liking her cheeks. I also find a lot of young girls are getting lip enhancemer and they have small lips, they want an injection of things like Restylane."

To some observers, however, cosmetic surgery for children and teenagers is simply wrong.

Quite apart from the sociological considerations, any operation under anesthetic carries risks, which n the medical benefits of a procedure, not the aesthetic results, said Anne Rochon Ford, executive direct Health Network.

But the phenomenon is also typical of a society that has put increasing pressure on girls, especially, to ideal of physical appearance, and has "normalized" cosmetic medicine, she said.

"People are prepared to put their children through surgery to supposedly look better? That I find is a v our culture," said Ms. Rochon Ford. "What that does is only increase prejudice and ill viewing of anyb which is completely insane."

The surgeons say they are cognizant of such criticism, and will typically refuse to perform the procedu seem in little need of enhancement, or whose parents appear to be pushing surgery for dubious reasor

"In a perfect world, we wouldn't care about those [body image] things," conceded Dr. Buonassisi while emotional benefits of nose and ear work. Even his receptionist, he said, notices how much more confic come back for their check-ups after six weeks. Ms. Goldstein said revamping the nose that had been th made a world of difference to her, but also suggests that today's beauty-obsessed culture is driving you room.

"If the media is going to put out publications and videos and whatnot of these beautiful people ... how OK with who we are?" she asks. "Everyone wants to be that little bit closer to something they see in the perfect."

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