Editorial

The Media: Friend or Foe?

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Television, women’s magazines, newspapers, and the Internet all are influential sources of information for patients interested in finding out about, or actually pursuing, plastic surgery. While most of the information that emanates from these media sources has been helpful and positive for our specialty, aesthetic surgery has also had its fair share of negative press. In some instances, the media has provided careless or even dangerous misinformation, or it has focused only on worst case scenarios, ignoring the vast majority of successful outcomes. Furthermore, many of us have had the personal experience of being misquoted by a reporter. Sometimes, we have been surprised to find that the reporter’s “agenda” actually was diametrically opposed to our own. As a result, aesthetic surgeons generally remain somewhat “skittish” about our interactions with the media. We still are not sure whether we should regard the media as “friend” or “foe.” There are compelling arguments on both sides of the issue.

We do know for certain that the number of plastic surgery procedures is on the rise, and the media has contributed substantially to an increased patient awareness of the available treatments. I have noted overall improvement, perhaps because of the influence of the Aesthetic Society and other organizations, with respect to the accuracy with which many procedures are now portrayed—with particular reference to the degree of simplicity or complexity of specific techniques and the length of recovery that patients can expect. The demand for nonsurgical, or minimally invasive, cosmetic procedures is, to some extent, a byproduct of this media-generated awareness.

But there is another aspect of the media’s influence that should equally interest and concern us, and that is the promotion of certain standards of beauty. Interestingly, Leonardo da Vinci was among those who first pursued a mathematical definition of the beautiful face. In recent decades, the media has truly influenced the process of defining beauty in our culture. Consider W magazine and many other such publications that feature page after page of beautiful breasts, bodies, noses, jaw lines, eyes, and so on—all of which send a strong message about what we should consider attractive and, by omission, what we should not.

In watching the specialty evolve over the past 35 years in practice, I have witnessed continued refinement in the results of surgical procedures to the point that we can come very close to actually achieving these ideals of beauty for some of our patients. Other patients can be significantly enhanced, but their results still fall short of what they, and we, might consider “ideal.” Yet, because of expectations encouraged by the images we view daily in the media, “perfection” is often the standard by which the results of plastic surgeons’ operative skills are measured.

The same process has occurred in the evolution of skin care and in patient expectations that a “perfect complexion” can be achieved simply by buying the “right” product or undergoing a “simple” treatment. Images in magazines and on TV portray flawless skin and promise miraculous results from over-the-counter moisturizers alone! How can patients not expect the same or better from medically-based treatments? With therapies including chemical peels, lasers, and intense pulsed light (IPL), to name a few, we have come a long way toward giving nearly all our patients the opportunity for a “nice” complexion. But, of course, the media has sometimes exaggerated the potential of new treatments. Although this has stimulated hopeful patients to seek help from our skin care clinics, it has also created immense pressure for us to deliver the expected results.

Even considering all of the above, I think that aesthetic surgeons can be generally positive about the media’s impact on our profession. The growing acceptance of plastic surgery in our society is the result of many influences, but the media has disseminated volumes of information to the public about newer procedures and stimulated the average person’s interest in what aesthetic
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Surgery might contribute to his or her own well-being. Certainly, the various women’s magazines constantly feature articles about breast implants, Botox injections, liposuction, fillers, and the whole range of aesthetic surgery procedures. Although not always 100% accurate, much of this information is valid, and much will be oriented toward the idea that these can be life-enhancing things to do. Even the negative articles focusing on “botched” procedures, tainted injectables, and the like often have the effect of increasing public awareness about the importance of choosing a qualified aesthetic surgeon or undergoing surgery in an accredited facility.

In addition, women’s magazines increasingly mention healthy lifestyle, nutrition, diet, supplements, and the “holistic” approach to wellness. In fact, there has been so much information over the past few years about improving lifestyle choices that I believe it is having a real and positive impact on the duration of results we obtain for patients through surgery. In my practice, over the past 13 years of heavy emphasis on nutrition and lifestyle, I have found that people who maintain a healthy lifestyle age more slowly after surgery. When they come into the office for follow-up, I observe that they simply keep looking good much longer.

Personally, I keep a copy of W magazine in each patient consultation room and frequently refer my patients to photos as a way of helping to define their goals, as well as mine, for the surgical result. I encourage patients undergoing rhinoplasty to show me the nose that they would like to have, and then I carefully explain (and document in the medical record) how close I think we can come to that. I believe that, as aesthetic surgeons, it is important for us to stay “tuned in” to what the media currently defines as “beauty”—which certainly changes from time to time—so that we can better understand what our patients expect from us today.

The media can be a friend or foe to aesthetic surgeons. Our first goal should be to do our part, using common sense and good taste, in helping the media to report accurately about the benefits and risks of aesthetic procedures. For the most part, legitimate and newsworthy information about aesthetic surgery that stimulates media coverage also stimulates patients to seek our expertise. The bottom line is that there will always be “standards of beauty” that are defined by our culture, including the media, and that our patients aspire to achieve—with our help. As aesthetic surgeons, we should constantly renew our acquaintance with these definitions of beauty and, as appropriate, incorporate that knowledge into the development of realistic surgical goals for our patients.