

Health and Behavior

7/7/2004

Regular folks get the star treatment

By Maria Puente, USA TODAY

Did he or didn't he? He did, and retired industrial engineer Bill Mullen is not only thrilled he got an eyelid lift at age 60, he's not afraid to talk about how much better he feels about his appearance.



Among procedures performed on Wichita's Marilyn Neifert: a chin tuck and face lift.
By Dr. Dan Bennett

"To say I'm happy is an understatement — I'm tickled pink," Mullen says six weeks after having the operation near his home in Prospect, Conn. "I not only have no regrets, I wish I had done it earlier."

Now cut to U.S. Sen. John Kerry, the presumed Democratic nominee for president. Did he or didn't he get Botox injections to smooth out his famously craggy visage? His staff denies it — as if Botoxing were an automatic disqualifier for the presidency. (Wife Teresa Heinz Kerry readily says she gets Botoxed.)

If so, millions of Americans such as Bill Mullen can never run for president — about 8.2 million Americans in 2003 alone. According to medical statistics,

that's how many surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures were performed last year in the USA, including 2.2 million Botox treatments. That doesn't count an unknown number administered by non-physicians at salons, spas and parties.

Nor does it count the millions of other new cosmetic procedures Americans have each year to improve their appearance, such as UV and sunless tanning, teeth whitening, laser hair removal, Brazilian waxing and color contacts to dramatically change eye color.



By Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY
Paula Moynahan gives an eyelid lift to Bill Mullen who was "tickled pink" by the results.

Call it the L.A.-ing of America. Once this sort of thing was the exclusive province of the rich and famous in Los Angeles and New York — and only then on the QT. Phyllis Diller may have joked about her plastic surgeries, but almost nobody else talked about it openly. Now everybody everywhere does it, and everybody blabs. (Except politicians.) New Jersey is even going to tax cosmetic procedures — a first — at 6%.

High schoolers get their faces scraped (microdermabrasion) for the prom; some even get bigger breasts for graduation gifts. Brides have so many ways to "improve" themselves before the wedding that they can take their pick of "something new": Botox, bikini wax or bleached teeth. Cosmetic transformation is Topic A in fashion magazines and beauty salons and now on national TV, on shows including ABC's *Extreme Makeover* and MTV's *I Want a Famous Face*.

Multitudes of non-famous, middle-class Americans are no longer satisfied with what God and DNA gave them. In the beauty-obsessed, instant-gratification culture that now prevails, they've embraced the idea that they can look better, so why not?

For Peter Fodor, a Los Angeles plastic surgeon and president of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, the change in attitudes is summed up in what he saw on the street the other day: Three people, not together, strolling around nonchalantly with plastic surgery bandages on different parts of their body. Even Fodor, in practice for 20 years, was shocked, and not just at the sight of people *walking* in Los Angeles.

"It's getting to the point that (surgery) is like going to the gym — it's a normal part of life," he says. "These days I see mail-delivery people, policemen, schoolteachers, even prison guards."

Surgical beautification has permeated "every strata of society," says plastic surgeon Paula Moynahan, who operated on Bill Mullen at her Waterbury, Conn., practice and has a busy New York office. "The idea of improving inside and outside is totally acceptable, whereas in the past it was seen as vain and self-serving and selfish."

How did it change?

It's the baby boomers, of course. They hate to age and hate even more looking their age. "They want to look good, feel good, no matter what it costs, and damn it, they're worth it," says William Dorfman, the dentist on *Extreme Makeover*.

Here's the formula: Take a huge population of aging consumers with plenty of disposable income, which is crucial because most cosmetic transformations are not covered by insurance. Add a thriving or at least a stable economy, because most surgical procedures are luxury items. Sprinkle growing numbers of plastic surgeons, cosmetic dentists and salon aestheticians. Throw in expanded and improved surgical techniques and increasingly affordable delivery systems, such as lasers and spray-on tanning machines. Whomp up the national advertising, while the glare of celebrity spotlight spreads the news even further to the unbleached, untucked, unwaxed masses. Then put it all on TV.

The result: Wichita grandmother Marilyn Neifert getting \$15,000 worth of cosmetic surgery. Two years ago, Neifert, then 59, spent eight hours on the table for a chin tuck, face lift,

eyelid tuck, chemical peel and liposuction. Is she an outcast in conservative Wichita? Not a bit, and she's more than happy to chat about it — after all, what's there to be embarrassed about?

"I just knew (the surgery) would make me look nicer," she says. "I always hated my double chin, ever since I was a teen, and I figured I might as well do the whole nine yards. To look the way I want is a dream come true for me."

Waxing is less risky and cheaper. The Brazilian bikini wax, named for seven Brazilian sisters who introduced it to New York in the late 1980s, leaves very little hair in the pubic area — for women and men — and can hurt like the dickens.

"I tried it a couple of times, mostly out of curiosity," says Melinda Burns, 42, a hairstylist and mother of three who got hers at A Morning Star Day Spa, where she works in Lubbock, Texas. "Summer's coming, a lot of (college) girls were getting it, so I thought, 'Let's be 10 again!' I'm adventurous."

Clearly, adventurousness is not just an L.A. thing, says Melissa Yamaguchi, 40, president of the Salon Association and owner of six California day spas, where the latest fad is the Playboy wax, which leaves genitalia totally bare.

"Trends used to trickle slowly to the Midwest, but nowadays people aren't waiting," says Yamaguchi, originally from Oklahoma. "People are picking up magazines, watching TiVo, getting everything instantly. When I grew up, if a girl had a tattoo, she was from the wrong side of the tracks. Now everyone has one, and you can't make a judgment call based on it."

Almost a spiritual experience

Indeed, there has been a sharp decline in coyness. Why else would dozens of people agree to be sliced and diced, and in their underwear, on national television?



By Carol Kaelson, ABC
Extreme Makeover results of
DeShante Hall, 23.

For DeShante Hall, 23, of Pittsburg, Calif., it was almost a spiritual experience — indeed "a miracle" she was picked for *Extreme Makeover*, back in September. "I have no regrets about sharing with America because it was a blessing to me," says Hall, whose makeover included reconstructing a cleft lip and mouth muscles, straightening her septum, grafting ear cartilage to her right nostril, reshaping her nose and having a tummy tuck, liposuction, an inner thigh lift, a chemical peel, a tooth porcelain veneer, gum augmentation and an upper bridge. "After the experience, you are less afraid of change and actually welcome change."

Especially if change isn't so expensive or public. Disposable color contact lenses have been around for nearly two decades, but only in the last two years have manufacturers begun to market them as fashion accessories. The result: about 2.6 million wearers.

"People really notice. They say, 'Wow, your eyes are gorgeous,'" says Alexis Rodriguez, 25, a New Yorker in fashion public relations who wears green FreshLook lenses that enhance her green eyes.

Teeth and body hair, too

Cosmetic dentistry, on the other hand, is almost as expensive as plastic surgery, and it is

booming: Estimates put the cosmetic segment of the \$70-billion-a-year U.S. dental industry at about \$15 billion. Surveys of members of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry show a 300% increase in tooth-whitening treatments in the last five years. Sales of Invisalign — invisible, removable plastic, night-guard-like braces to straighten teeth that can cost up to \$5,000 — grew 75% in 2003.

Aesthetic dentistry has grown because "people go to dentists not just to fix or maintain healthy teeth, they go for the sole purpose of maintaining a better-looking smile," says David Thrower, vice president for Align Technologies, which makes Invisalign.

A perfect smile has become the new beauty standard — and never mind the one you inherited from Mom and Dad, adds Lawrence Addleson, a San Diego dentist and president of the cosmetic dentists academy, which had 60 founding members in 1984 and now has 6,300. "I have young patients who want a specific celebrity's smile or they bring in magazines and say, 'I want that smile,' " he says.

Another thing men and women want is less body hair. Even though the human race has grown steadily less hirsute since caveman days, we are still obsessed with plucking every stray hair from brows, backs, lips, legs, underarms, wherever. Thus, the spreading popularity of permanent hair removal by lasers, which use high-intensity pulsed light to attack hair follicles at the roots. In 2003 there were nearly 1 million laser hair-removal procedures conducted by physicians, a 25% jump from the year before, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

"It's the times we're living in: There's an ideal appearance, and it's not a hairy man or woman," says Leonard LaCivita, a doctor and medical director of American Laser Centers, a chain of physician-supervised laser clinics that has grown to 34 locations in two years.

That's why waxing has been big business for years, says Tina Alster, director of the Washington (D.C.) Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery, so it's no surprise that a procedure to zap hair permanently and less painfully than waxing or electrolysis would be attractive to consumers and entrepreneurs.

But dermatologists such as Alster are alarmed about the unknown (but probably growing) number of laser treatments performed by non-physicians in mall salons and day spas. Used improperly, lasers can burn and scar skin or leave it hyperpigmented. In 2001 nearly half the 2,400 members of the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery reported an increase in patients seeking treatment for botched laser treatments by non-physicians. Different states have different regulations about who can perform laser treatments.

Why would people put themselves in the hands of non-physicians? It's cheaper, for one thing. Alster says removing hair from the upper lip would cost about \$250 a treatment in her clinic. Prices at a salon might be a fraction of that.

People want cosmetic transformation at reduced rates? Shocking. But at least they're not ashamed and hiding.

Cut back to John Kerry. He went to the dentist recently and came out with two new pearly white crowns on his front teeth. But, his aides insisted, he did *not* get his teeth whitened. Just cleaned.

Very presidential.

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