

'A COMPANY WAS PHONING ME THREE OR FOUR TIMES A DAY FOR A COMMITMENT'

Vikki Meagher 45, had breast reduction surgery last year because she was having problems playing sports

'It really is a minefield trying to get quality, unbiased information and it leaves people very vulnerable.

'As soon as I started considering surgery I looked at adverts in glossy magazines.

'I contacted one of the main cosmetic surgery providers for information, but I was aware that, just because a company advertises, it didn't mean it was the best for my needs.

'After an initial chat I felt I was put under a lot of pressure to take up surgery. At one point the clinic was phoning me three or four times a day pushing me to make a commitment – I felt quite overwhelmed.

'After looking around on the internet I found a company called the Patient Advisory Service, which works with a group of consultants, and spoke to a woman who gave me lots of advice and information.

'She helped me to

arrange appointments with several specialists in breast-reduction surgery from private practices and gave me their CVs to look over before I had the consultations.

'I went with a local surgeon who had his own clinic and who I felt most comfortable with. He gave me clear quotes and a choice of hospitals.

'I paid £4,700 for the surgery, which included the surgeon's fees, overnight stay in a hospital and an anaesthetist. Had I chosen a different hospital I would have paid between £200 and £400 more.

'The surgeon told me that if I wasn't completely happy with the surgery, he'd revise it without charging.

'After the operation I had regular check-ups with him for the following six months.

I'm thrilled to bits with the results, and I can go without a wearing a bra for the first time.'



Cosmetic

People are increasingly choosing to give nature a helping hand, but cosmetic procedures need more serious thought. Our guide can help

Cosmetic surgery and treatments are no longer just for rich and famous people. In the UK last year, we opted for around 700,000 procedures, compared with just 202,000 in 2001.

But we think the media glamorises cosmetic procedures while underplaying the risks. This, combined with poor regulation, means many people don't have what they need to make informed choices before undergoing a procedure.

Poor information was evident in our 2006 survey, carried out for our campaign for improved consumer protection and information relating to surgery and treatments.

In the coming weeks, we'll expand our online information on cosmetic procedures, with pages of independent advice to help you make the right choices (see www.which.co.uk/cosmetic-surgery).

TYPES OF PROCEDURE

Cosmetic procedures include surgery, such as face-lifts and liposuction, while non-surgical treatments include Botox, laser hair removal and chemical peels.

Non-surgical treatments make up 85 per cent of procedures. They're quicker and cheaper – costing an average of £200 per treatment compared with £3,700 on average for surgery.

All procedures can be risky and we're concerned that regulation, particularly of non-surgical treatments, is inadequate.

RESEARCHING PROCEDURES

You should get as much information as you can about procedures you're interested in, including expected results, recovery times and potential risks.

Be careful where you get your information. Most people we spoke to thought they were well informed but, in fact, needed more details about risks and regulation. They had spent at least three months searching the internet and reading newspapers, magazines and clinic brochures – but these cannot be relied on as being impartial.

Those in our survey made the common mistake of focusing on costs, while assuming that private cosmetic procedures are safe and regulated. One respondent told us: 'I think you get what you pay for. Because you're paying a higher price with private care they're going to have more stringent safety procedures in place.'

You should talk to your GP before opting for any cosmetic surgery or treatment.

CHOOSING A PROVIDER

Non-surgical procedures

These treatments are widely available but only clinics offering laser and intense pulsed light (IPL) treatments must register with, and be inspected by, the Healthcare Commission (HC) in England. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the rules are similar and the regulatory bodies are the Care Commission, the Health Inspectorate Wales and the Regulation and Quality





sense

Improvement Authority respectively. We are concerned that across the UK many providers that should register do not.

We also think that Botox providers in particular should be regulated by the HC or its equivalents. As a prescription drug, however, Botox must be prescribed by a doctor, dentist or nurse prescriber – sometimes no such professional is involved. Also, it is illegal to advertise prescription drugs but Botox is promoted. Problems with the drug have included overdoses and injections in wrong parts of the face.

One woman we interviewed who had received Botox said: 'I thought if there was a major risk, they wouldn't be doing it.'

Other non-surgical procedures, such as dermal fillers and chemical peels, are not regulated at all. These can often be carried out in salons by therapists without specific training and experience.

For qualifications to look for and other details on procedures you can check our website. You can also get advice from the Department of Health and HC websites.

Surgical procedures

Choosing a doctor is difficult, as no specific qualifications are required for cosmetic surgery. He or she should be a qualified surgeon and have specialist training and experience in your chosen procedure. The General Medical Council can tell you whether your surgeon is registered and their qualifications. You can also search for surgeons on the website of the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS).

There are several private hospital groups, plus more than 300 private clinics, offering cosmetic surgery in the UK. These must

Checklist

Questions you should ask

- What are the likely results?
- What are the risks?
- How long will I take to recover?
- What aftercare will I need and do you provide it?
- What experience do you have and what have been your previous results, such as satisfaction and complication rates?
- What will it cost?
- What are the arrangements for emergency care?
- What happens if I sign up then decide not to have the procedure?

A good professional should answer all of these questions and: take a detailed medical history; assess the suitability of treatment; and give you information in writing and time to think before signing up.

be registered with the HC or equivalent and offer a patient guide, detailing services and costs. Inspection reports should be available.

YOUR FIRST CONSULTATION

Visit several providers for a no-obligation consultation, which you will usually pay for. Always see an experienced professional, preferably the person who will perform the procedure.

Don't be pressured into making a quick decision. If you're offered special deals for signing up immediately, walk away. One respondent told us: 'She wasn't a medical professional; she was a sales professional. I feel they were just trying to make money.'

IF THINGS GO WRONG

Even all the right checks will not ensure you will be satisfied with your treatment, but there is no easy way to complain.

Thirteen per cent of our respondents said treatment didn't meet their expectations, but less than a fifth complained, often because they didn't know how or whether they could. If you're not satisfied, speak up. Talk to your provider about rectifying the problem. If you are still dissatisfied, follow its internal complaints procedure – all registered providers must have one; ask to see a written copy. If you're still unhappy with a registered provider, complain to the HC or

Contacts

Action against Medical Accidents
0845 123 2352; www.avma.org.uk

BAAPS
020 7405 2234; www.baaps.org.uk

Care Commission
0845 603 0890; www.carecommission.org

Consulting Room
www.consultingroom.com

Department of Health
020 7210 4850
www.dh.gov.uk/cosmeticsurgery

General Dental Council
020 7887 3800; www.gdc-uk.org

General Medical Council
0845 357 3456; www.gmc-uk.org

Healthcare Commission
0845 601 3012
www.healthcarecommission.org.uk

Healthcare Inspectorate Wales
029 2092 8850; www.hiw.org.uk

Independent Healthcare Advisory Services
020 7379 8598
www.independenthealthcare.org.uk

Nursing and Midwifery Council
020 7637 7181; www.nmc-uk.org

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority 028 9051 7500; www.rqia.org.uk

Which? guide to cosmetic procedures
www.which.co.uk/cosmetic-surgery

equivalent, or the Independent Healthcare Advisory Services if it is a member. If your complaint is about performance of an individual, such as a doctor, contact his or her registration council (see 'Contacts', above).

You may be able to consider legal action if you think your treatment was not carried out with reasonable care and skill or where you have pain or injury, but you will need to seek legal advice. Our web pages and Action against Medical Accidents can advise you how to do this.

THE FUTURE

We are campaigning for improvements in information and advice and for the introduction of a mandatory cooling-off period.

We think that all providers should be registered (with tougher regulation for Botox and injectable fillers), that they should follow an industry code of practice and that current regulation and standards should be better enforced.

We also want a better complaints system and we'll keep you informed on progress.

OUR RESEARCH

In September last year we surveyed 306 people who were planning or had undergone cosmetic procedures and interviewed 30 of them in depth.

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