



Plastic Surgery in the Press

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Received 13 January 2008; accepted 23 June 2008

KEYWORDS

Plastic surgery;
Cosmetic surgery;
Image;
Media;
Newspapers

Summary The media play a vital role in public education. The predominant image they portray of plastic and reconstructive surgery is that of cosmetic surgery, whilst the specialty's true scope is often misrepresented. The aim was to evaluate portrayal of plastic surgery in the national newspapers.

LexisNexis™ Professional search engine was used to retrieve articles from all UK newspapers published in 2006 that contained the term 'plastic surgery' and each article was analysed.

Of 1191 articles, 89% used the term 'plastic surgery' in the context of cosmetic surgery and only 10% referred to reconstructive work. There were 197 feature articles on cosmetic surgery and 52% of them included a quote from the medical profession. If the quoted doctor was on the UK General Medical Council (GMC) specialist register for plastic surgery, it was significantly more likely that a potential problem or complication associated with cosmetic surgery would be mentioned ($p = 0.015$).

The vast majority of newspaper articles refer only to the cosmetic component of plastic surgery. When quoted, doctors on the GMC specialist register for plastic surgery provide a more balanced view of cosmetic surgery. Further initiative is needed to portray the full scope of plastic and reconstructive surgery to the general public.

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Introduction

The British Association of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons defines plastic surgery as "the combination of various surgical skills and techniques to attempt to restore normal, functional anatomy from the abnormal, whether the abnormality is congenital, traumatic or as

a result of a disease process such as cancer or infection"¹. However, the public's predominant image of plastic surgeons and plastic surgery is that of 'cosmetic' surgeons and this perception is also held to some degree by other health care professionals^{2,3}. Purely cosmetic procedures make up only a small proportion of the overall workload of most British plastic surgeons, and indeed in today's National Health Service the cosmetic operation is a rarity. The true scope and content of plastic and reconstructive surgery continues to be misrepresented which may have an adverse impact on the profession's morale, working

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Table 1 Classification of articles

Cosmetic	Feature Article Celebrity TV Shows Advice Column Products In Passing
Reconstructive	Trauma Burns Oncological Infection
Other	Eg. waiting lists

relationships with other specialties and the doctor-patient relationship.

It is widely acknowledged that much of the misperception of plastic and reconstructive surgeons hails from the predominant media image of plastic surgery in the context of cosmetic surgery alone. The media play a vital role in public education and have power to influence the opinion of the general public on plastic surgery⁴⁻⁶. Movies featuring plastic surgery often involve cosmetic surgery to the exclusion of plastic surgeon's reconstructive talents⁷. The news media have been shown to portray an unfavourable image of plastic surgeons in the United States during the silicone breast implant controversy⁸.

Whilst the image of plastic surgery is important to the profession, perhaps of greater concern is the portrayal of cosmetic surgery as a lifestyle choice and free from any possible negative consequences. Many of the popular media sources such as television and internet portray cosmetic surgery in this light but it would prove very difficult to fairly evaluate. However, it is possible to retrieve all national newspaper articles that include the term 'plastic surgery' and determine the context of its use. Those referring to cosmetic surgery can be assessed for fair representation of

the possible side effects and complications, and also whether a more balanced view is given if the articles include quotes from a qualified plastic surgeon.

Methods

LexisNexis™ Professional search engine for UK newspapers was used to retrieve all articles from broadsheet and tabloid UK newspapers, published between January 1st 2006 and December 31st 2006, that contained the term 'plastic surgery'. The articles were read and the context in which the term 'plastic surgery' had been used was classified under headings 'cosmetic', 'reconstructive' or 'other' as in Table 1.

When the term 'plastic surgery' was used in the context of cosmetic surgery, it was decided if the article was a feature on cosmetic surgery, celebrities, television shows, an advice column, commercial products or if the term was simply mentioned in passing. If the article used the term 'plastic surgery' in the context of reconstructive surgery it was subdivided into the nature of reconstructive surgery. All other articles were placed in the 'other' column which included articles on waiting lists in general and on the politics of hospital medicine. For all articles, it was noted whether or not they included a quote from a medical practitioner. The UK General Medical Council (GMC) specialist register for plastic surgery was examined for the presence of those doctors quoted. Finally, the articles were examined for the inclusion of text highlighting any potential problems or complications in reference to cosmetic surgery Table 2. All data was analysed using Microsoft® Excel 2003.

Results

LexisNexis™ Professional search engine retrieved 1326 articles from all UK national newspapers in 2006 including the term 'plastic surgery'. There were 1191 original

Table 2 Total numbers

						Total
Cosmetic						1056
Feature Article	197	Quote from specialist	72	Mention potential probs	43	
				Do not mention potential probs	29	
		Quote from other dr	30	Mention potential probs	10	
				Do not mention potential probs	20	
Celebrity	311					
TV shows	61					
Advice Column	15					
Products	10					
In Passing	462					
Reconstructive						113
Trauma	83					
Burns	21					
Oncological	3					
Infection	5					
Other						22
Repeats						135
Total						1326

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