

Plastic surgery gaining acceptance in the African-American community

Written by Aleesa Mann, Special to the NNPA from the Howard University News Service
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - A woman pokes and pinches her face in front of a mirror, wondering if a smaller nose and thinner lips will boost her confidence. A patient stands in a gown as her doctor draws surgical lines on her body, and a man blushes, teary-eyed as his family sees him for the first time after his face-lift.

These scenes from reality TV shows like ABC's "Extreme Makeover" and E! channel's "Dr. 90210" mark a period of candor towards cosmetic surgery in the media. Some may even say they are, in part, responsible for the public's change in attitude towards cosmetic procedures. Even among African Americans and other racial minorities, this once taboo procedure is gaining acceptance.

The changing face of cosmetic patients is largely attributed to improving socioeconomic status among minority communities, images of cosmetic surgery in the media, and the open admission of celebrities who have undergone plastic surgery. Hollywood stars Queen Latifah, Tina Turner, Toni Braxton and Patti LaBelle are among the few African American celebrities who have actually admitted that they have had some work done. Now the trend is transitioning into the general populous.

More than 900,000 African Americans underwent plastic surgery in 2008, a 145 percent increase since 2000, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Numbers for other minority groups are also on the rise.

"These makeover shows have made cosmetic surgery more acceptable," said Dr. Michelle Hardaway, an African American plastic surgeon in Farmington Hills, MI. Procedures she feels many people once regarded as only for the rich and famous, are now much less so.

TV programs have made it more normal, she said.

Dr. Stephen Baker, plastic surgeon and associate professor at Georgetown University Hospital, says the number of people with disposable incomes has helped contribute to the popularity of plastic surgery for patients. TV programming, Baker said, is also a factor.

"I think TV has somewhat demystified it," Baker said. "The stigma is gone, so maybe they feel a little less guilty about doing it themselves."

In his own practice, Baker has observed plastic surgery become more socially acceptable among minority communities. Over the years, he said, the number of African Americans he has treated has grown to almost a sixth of his patient base.

While plastic surgery patients are predominantly caucasian, the number of cosmetic patients among Hispanic, African American and Asian communities has experienced rapid growth spurts in recent years. Combined, the number of minority patients opting for plastic surgery jumped 64 percent between 2004 and 2005, and another 33 percent between 2007 and 2008, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons reports.

In 2008, African Americans made up 8 percent of patients in the cosmetic surgery industry, an

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industry that pulled in over \$10 billion that year.

“I think it speaks to our culture being more mainstream,” said Shane.

Perrault, an African American psychologist in Silver Springs, MD, said of the blurring of racial and social lines in today’s American culture: “There was a time when we didn’t do things because it felt like we were selling out. That mentality is gone and now we have a more glamorized, mainstream focus.”

For Perrault, the growing number of African Americans undergoing plastic surgery indicates a trickling down effect of values – those that start in pop culture, and overtime become accepted by society.

The stigma towards plastic surgery may be going in the direction of the stigma that used to be reserved for hair extensions, Perrault suggested.

“Those are so mainstream you don’t even think about it anymore,” he said.

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, liposuction, nose reshaping and breast reduction are the most commonly requested surgical procedures among African American cosmetic patients. Botox, injectable fillers and chemical peels are the most popular minimally invasive procedures.

While Hardaway agrees African Americans are opening up to the idea of plastic surgery, she still notices a lingering hesitation among the community when it comes to rhinoplasty, also known as nose-reshaping.

“Sometimes I’ll see patients who have family telling them not to have it,” she said. “Or sometimes they won’t even tell the family because of the stigma.”

One patient came in for a consultation for rhinoplasty, but didn’t go through with the procedure until years later, Hardaway said.

Both Hardaway and Baker have observed an increase in their African American clientele, and both emphasize that the growth includes men, as well.

Hardway identified liposuction, eyelid procedures, and fillers as some of the most popular requests among her African American male patients.

The doctors also agree on another point: the increase in plastic surgeries among African Americans does not reflect a changing self-identity. Their patients, they say, aren’t trying to significantly change their appearance; they’re just looking for an improvement.

Baker likens it to trying to get the upper hand against the natural thinning and sagging of skin over time.

“The clock and gravity don’t change,” Baker said. “And I think that as people live longer they

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want to look as good as they feel.”