

## **'I just want to look good'; Cosmetic surgery's not just for the famous. But is there really anything sinful about our desire for perfection?**

*CHARMAINE Haddad-Hatton bites her lower lip and keeps counting under her breath, using her fingers to tick off how many times she's gone under the knife.*

*Thumb, pointer, middle - three tummy tucks.*

*Four, five, and six?*

*A breast reduction, liposuction, and a back lift.*

"I firmly believe in plastic surgery," the 53-year-old mother says, leaning across the table in her remodelled kitchen. "Is that my vanity or do I just want to look good?"

That's a \$20,000 question.

The popularity of cosmetic surgery has soared over the last decade. The number of cosmetic procedures done in the United States jumped by 457 per cent since 1997, according to a study released earlier in March by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Those figures also include non-surgical procedures like Botox injections.

Experts say the numbers are also on the rise in Canada, but it's the story behind the statistics that interests social scientists.

Certain types of perfectionists are drawn to cosmetic surgery, a Dalhousie University psychologist found. Self-promoters want to create a perfect image of themselves and then flaunt it, Simon Sherry says.

"There's the idea that (these) people may have a prideful sense of self," he says. "They want to show off and they want to promote, (and it) seems to overlap with pride, vanity, and narcissism."

Other types of perfectionists may feel completely the opposite, he says. Instead, they are unhappy with their bodies and want to cut away perceived imperfection.

But a scalpel isn't a magic wand.

"There's anecdotal evidence (that) perfectionism may be tied to an almost insatiable appetite for cosmetic surgery," Sherry says. "The thing that drives them to seek out cosmetic surgery may be (what) leads them to feel dissatisfied with the result - and to consider more surgery."

For Haddad-Hatton, it all started about 25 years ago when a local physician gave her a tune-up after the birth of her daughter. The botched tummy tuck changed the position of the Coxheath woman's belly button and left her with "three different stomachs."

Her next two abdominoplasties - including a reverse one - were to fix what the first doctor left behind, she says.

She decided to get her "touch-ups" about six years ago. She'd just lost about 70 pounds and gained several inches of skin. A back lift got rid of

most of it, and the tummy tucks and liposuction smoothed out her body.

"It can be addictive," she says. "But I don't think it's vanity, so much as (it's) doing something for myself. . . . I know I'm never going to be a skinny little Barbie girl, but I like to feel comfortable in my skin."

There is only one practising plastic surgeon in Cape Breton. About 10 per cent of Dr. Abdul Atiyah's work is cosmetic surgery. He isn't sure how many cosmetic procedures he does each year, but did say the numbers are steadily going up.

When patients say they want extreme work done, the surgeon says he asks them to rank their body to find out what bothers them the most. But most people who want to get surgery are truly unhappy with one part of their body, he says.

His most frequent visitors are women in their mid-30s to mid-40s who want to tighten up their post-baby bodies.

"A lot of my patients who (come in for) a tummy tuck actually lose more weight afterwards because they feel good about themselves," he says. "Nobody is going to . . . accept the risks of major surgery just for something minor."

But society rewards beautiful people.

Teachers give pretty students better marks, attractive job applicants receive higher salaries, and handsome

defendants are more likely to be found innocent, according to studies compiled by the Social Issues Research Centre.

There's an intense pressure to look good, sociology professor Tammy Anderson says, and since there's easy technology to "freeze the clock," society expects people to do just that.

"Because the technology is available and it is accessible . . . it's getting to

the point where it could be becoming a moral imperative," the University of Delaware professor says. There's the idea that "you should buy breasts that are perky and round, because you can."

"We're treading on very dangerous ground."

People are no longer secretive about these surgeries, Anderson says. And the more people start talking about

the way they've changed their bodies, 'It can be addictive. But I don't think it's vanity, so much as (it's) doing something for myself. . . . I know I'm never going to be a skinny little Barbie girl, but I like to feel comfortable in my skin.'

**Figure:**

Charmaine Haddad-Hatton, 53, jokes about cosmetic surgery. Haddad-Hatton has had six procedures done. Although she doesn't aspire to look like a supermodel, she says she now looks and feels better- and that there's nothing sinful about it. (Laura Fraser / Cape Breton Bureau)

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