Cosmetic surgeons should be certified in their area of practice, says new guidance

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London

The Royal College of Surgeons and the General Medical Council (GMC) have published new guidance on cosmetic procedures but called on the government to include legislation in the next Queen’s speech to fully protect patients.

The college’s new Professional Standards for Cosmetic Surgery states that surgeons who perform cosmetic surgery should be certified in the area of surgery in which they practise.1

The GMC guidance, which was developed after a public consultation, covers surgical procedures, such as breast augmentation, and non-surgical procedures, such as botulinum toxin (Botox). It makes clear the ethical obligations doctors have to patients and the standards of care that they must provide.2

Both sets of guidance have been produced after the Poly Implant Prosthèse (PIP) breast implant scandal and the review of the cosmetic industry by Bruce Keogh, NHS England’s medical director, which highlighted major problems with unsafe practices in the cosmetic sector.3,4

Surgeons and the GMC have been lobbying the government to tighten current rules that have allowed doctors, including non-surgeons, to perform cosmetic surgery without taking additional training or gaining additional qualifications.5

Stephen Cannon, chair of the Cosmetic Surgery Interspecialty Committee and vice president of the Royal College of Surgeons, said, “Cosmetic surgery is a booming industry, but the law currently allows any doctor—surgeon or otherwise—to perform cosmetic surgery in the private sector. This can make it difficult for patients to identify an experienced, highly trained surgeon from someone who should not be practising.”

The Royal College of Surgeons standards state that the operating surgeon must also obtain written consent from the patient and not delegate this task to a colleague.

The standards call for a two week “cooling off” period before patients consent to an operation, so that they have time to consider the decision. Surgeons should not use financial inducements, such as discounts or time limited offers.

Later this year the college will launch a new certification scheme, allowing patients to more easily search for a surgeon who has the necessary skills and experience to perform a particular cosmetic procedure.

The GMC guidance says that any advertising of cosmetic procedures must be clear and factual and must not use promotional tactics such as two for one offers. Patients should not feel rushed or pressured into making a decision to undergo a procedure. It also said that the doctor must make sure that patients know who to contact and how their care will be managed if they experience any complications.

Terence Stephenson, chair of the GMC, said, “It is a challenging area of medicine which deals with patients who can be extremely vulnerable. Most doctors who practise in this area do so to a high standard, but we do sometimes come across poor practice and it is important that patients are protected from this and that doctors understand what is expected from them.”

3 Torjesen I. Cosmetic interventions need tighter controls to protect patients, review concludes. BMJ 2013;346:f2631. doi:10.1136/bmj.f2631 pmid:23615600.
5 Iacobucci G. Reform of medical regulation is left off the Queen’s speech for a second time. BMJ 2015;350:h2916. doi:10.1136/bmj.h2916 pmid:26023087.

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