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Teens slipping deep into 'silicone' valley

As demand for plastic surgery among teenagers shoots up, doctors say parents are often to blame



ILLUSTRATION: ABHIMANYU SINHA

Jaya Shroff Bhalla
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DR SUNIL Choudhary, head of plastic surgery at Max Healthcare, received an odd request last week. A 16-year-old girl wanted breast implants.

"I was taken aback to hear that her parents had agreed to the procedure because she aspired to be a model and her breast size didn't meet the contest requirement," Choudhary said.

While teens flock to clinics for cosmetic enhancement, doctors have a trying time dissuading them.

Choudhary went by the book. "When my efforts to counsel the parents and the girl failed, I decided against the procedure. We are bound by certain rules guiding cosmetic surgery," he said.

Other surgeons face similar dilemmas every day. "While requests for breast implantation are few, liposuction rules, with rhinoplasty (surgery on the nose) and breast reduction for boys being next in demand," Choudhary said.

However, no Delhi hospital has counsellors for young people seeking to go under the scalpel, so surgeons have to fill in that role as well.

Most cosmetic specialists receive at least one request a week from teens looking for nips and tucks, with half of them opting out after a chat.

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—DR VIVEK KUMAR
cosmetic surgeon at Sir Gangaram Hospital

Sometimes, counselling does not help. "A woman wanted her son to get liposuction done, but I advised him to try dieting and exercise. Six months later, she was back with the same request. I felt coerced into doing the surgery, knowing well that her son had not tried losing weight at all," said Dr Rashmi Taneja, consultant plastic surgeon at Gurgaon's Artemis Health Institute.

Most teenagers come with their parents, whose consent is mandatory for any procedure on a minor.

"If the child's self-esteem is involved, we go ahead after consultations with parents, paediatricians and psychologists," said Dr Vivek Kumar, cosmetic surgeon at Sir Gangaram Hospital.

Dr Anupam Sibal, group director (hospital services) Apollo Hospital, however, insists providing information makes a difference. "When health indicators such as Body Mass Index are explained to parents, they understand and help their child make the right decision," he said.