

Cosmetic surgeon strives to make a difference

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In one doctor's opinion, reconstructive and cosmetic surgeries have the same goal: improving quality of life.

Whether he's fixing a cleft palate, a big nose, or unsightly ears, Frederick Lukash, M.D., believes that all plastic surgery has a common denominator: improving the patient's self esteem. With that in mind, Dr. Lukash combines his artistic talents in plastic surgery with his concern for children, and performs "quality-of-life" surgeries around the world.

He credits his career choices and philosophy of life to the profound influence of two people: his medical school mentor and his famous father.

When he was a little boy, Dr. Lukash knew his father was important. "Wherever my father went, he was recognized. When we went to restaurants, the maitre d' had his table ready. Even the local gas station gave him personal attention by picking up his car for service, and keeping a running tab on his gasoline."

Dr. Lukash had no idea all the special attention was because his father was Leslie Lukash, M.D., a world-famous medical examiner in Nassau County, N.Y., who founded the Association of Medical Examiners, identified the Nazi scientist Mengele in Brazil, and would later become the basis of the TV show, Quincy. No, to the young boy in New York City in the mid-1950s, his father was important for just one reason - he was a doctor.

"It was an impression that when you're a physician, people really looked up to and respected you. That was the environment in which I grew up. Being a doctor was put in such an elevated light, it was an interesting tone for me that when you were a doctor, money was much less important than respect."

Medicine was foregone conclusion

So, while the younger Lukash would read a book on engineering or explore other potential careers, he kept returning to medicine. When he entered Tulane University, his father's alma mater, it was almost a foregone conclusion that he would go on to medical school.

When he enrolled in Tulane's medical school, it was surgery that caught his eye, for much the same reason medicine, in general, had attracted him when he was a boy. "It was

because of the respect the surgeons commanded," Dr. Lukash said. "I never really looked at my father's field. If I were doing it again today, I might have given that a second look because I like the forensics behind it. I didn't understand that when I was growing up. I knew he did autopsies, but I really didn't grasp the vastness of criminology and the interaction with the police. Now, you see it all on TV."

Improving young lives. But where his father dealt with death, Dr. Lukash was attracted to improving life, particularly in children.

"I like kids and was toying with the idea of pediatric surgery. Then, my senior year of medical school, on an exchange program with Harvard, I met Bob Goldwyn, M.D., and we became mentor and pupil, I guess. He had a profound influence on my decision to go into plastic surgery."

Dr. Lukash said it wasn't an overt suggestion from Dr. Goldwyn. "I just liked the way he thought -- his renaissance approach to life. He was a total person. He talked about books and theater, and I thought he had a good balance of medical, intellect, and world thought. I realized that was the way I wanted to live my life."

When he was in training, Dr. Lukash says no one started out as a cosmetic surgeon. Most of the work was reconstructive, but practices usually evolved over time. As he got older, his practice naturally seemed to turn more toward cosmetics, he explains.

"I really took a liking to the three-dimensional process," Dr. Lukash said. "I did a lot of pediatric plastic surgery and that just evolved into cosmetic surgery, which is the way I thought it was supposed to be."

He liked doing cleft lip and palate surgery and breast reconstructions. Because insurance was so different, Dr. Lukash felt no pressure to do more cosmetic procedures in order to increase his office revenue. As his reputation grew, however, so did the demand for his cosmetic talents.

"My practice moved from about one-third breast reconstruction, one-third pediatric, and a third cosmetic, to eventually evolving into the mostly cosmetic surgery practice that it is now."

Today, reimbursements have become an issue that encourages Dr. Lukash to emphasize cosmetic procedures. "Survival is really an integral part of it right now," he said. "You build up responsibilities to your family. You have to work so you have income and revenue. You can't say, "I'm not going to do the facelift, I'd rather do the cleft lip instead."

But Dr. Lukash did not feel he was abandoning his reconstructive patients. He came to realize that all of plastic surgery had a commonality. He calls it quality-of-life surgery. "I look at each problem as a resolution of someone's self-esteem issue," he said. "Once I put that into my own brain, I really didn't think of it as cosmetic versus reconstruction. I think

it's all the same; they are all problems that need to be solved so a person feels better about him or herself."

Dr. Lukash has a large pediatric practice. "It's noses, ears, asymmetrical breasts, and big breasts -- all the things that befall the pediatric and adolescent population. I love working with that group of people. A lot of it is cosmetic, so I get the benefits of helping them with their self-esteem and setting them off on the right journey. And I have the benefits of the reimbursement, so it works for me."

For critics who question cosmetic surgery for young people on the grounds that they need to learn that real beauty comes from within, Dr. Lukash did a study that he says proves that's not realistic.

"I've asked all the kids I've operated on over the last 30 years (who were of the appropriate age) to draw me pictures of their experiences before and after surgery. I had more than 400 drawings looked at by art therapists and child psychiatrists, and there is no question that there is a profound change in the way children and teenagers look at themselves after surgery. That's what helped me decide there is no difference between cosmetic and reconstructive surgery -- that what we do is quality-of-life surgery. We have a major responsibility to the self-esteem of our patients."

Dr. Lukash likened his work on children to breast reconstruction that is done following a mastectomy. He said, once the patient is cured of cancer, breast reconstruction is not medically necessary, but it has everything to do with how that person perceives herself.

"We would do the same thing if someone had cancer on the face, or someone who was in an auto accident, or someone who was born with a cleft lip," he said. "So, if a person who has a problem with aging comes in, or a patient who happens to have a big nose that makes him feel insecure -- to me, it's all the same. We have a responsibility to do the right thing, if the right thing will help that person."

Reaching out with care

Dr. Lukash extends his care to children in orphanages or state care, who are not adoptable because of physical deformities.

"One of the things my father instilled in me was a high moral code. It's hard for me to coldly say, 'No.' So, yes, I have done some work to help the kids get adopted. They include kids who were born with extra digits or whose ears stick out."

He also takes his work overseas, originally with a group called Surgical Aid to Children of the World.

Outstanding citizenship. "We brought a little girl back who had swallowed lye, and in two visits we reconstructed her esophagus, lasered open her scarred pharynx, and reconstituted her vocal cords." For that work, Dr. Lukash was presented the Outstanding Citizen award by Woodmen of the World Life Insurance.

In another case, Dr. Lukash was contacted by the New York Philharmonic because a cellist from the visiting Warsaw Symphony had a cleft palate and was afraid to have surgery in Poland. Dr. Lukash performed the surgery. "You know what the pay-off was? He did a concert in the lobby of the hospital for the kids -- that was the quid pro quo."

Dr. Lukash's involvement with children extends to his home - which as some surgeons acknowledge, isn't always the case.

"I'm consumed with spending a lot of time with my kids. I realized that because of what my father did, I didn't really see him that much. So, I just do a lot of things with my kids."

His daughters are all fencers, so he fences with them. He also took up piano 15 years ago. "I like all types of music and I recognized music would be important for my children. How could I say they had to practice piano if nobody was doing any music in the house? You have to lead by example, so we all learned.

"Our vacations are always together. It doesn't matter whether we go to Europe, Mexico, or skiing. I prefer to travel with them than without them."

Dr. Lukash says it's important to know that you made a difference in your world -- personally and professionally.

"When you're finished, and you finally lay down your scalpel, or get your gold watch, you have to be able to look back and say, 'I did make a difference.' I think that's really the critical thing."