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Beyond Aesthetics

When Cosmetic Procedures Lead to Better Patient Health

By Dan Walker

“It is better to look good than to feel good,” proclaimed actor/director Fernando Lamas.

The rise in popularity of cosmetic procedures recently might suggest that Americans have taken to heart Lamas’ signature catch phrase, immortalized by Billy Crystal on television’s *Saturday Night Live*. But is there a benefit to cosmetic procedures beyond the aesthetic aspects?

For some people and certain procedures, the answer is yes. This is why it makes perfect sense for practitioners in general medicine to take an interest in cosmetic medicine, under the right circumstances. A handful of new techniques originally developed to make patients look better are now proving themselves to have an affect on helping them live longer, healthier lives.

SEEKING BETTER HEALTH FROM BEAUTY — IT IS BETTER TO LOOK AND FEEL GOOD

One practitioner who has embraced the linkage of health and beauty is Herman Pang, M.D., of Cardiothoracic & Vascular

Surgeons, Ltd. in Scottsdale. Over the last few years, Dr. Pang’s practice has branched out considerably, from lifesaving heart and lung surgeries, to vascular work — including laser vein ablation procedures — and now to other new cosmetic procedures with the potential to improve the health of certain patients suffering from vein disease, obesity or diabetes.

Dr. Pang did not enter medicine to pursue aesthetic medicine. After graduating with honors from the Loma Linda University School of Medicine in 1980, he stayed at Loma Linda to complete his residency, and even became an instructor of surgery. From there he went to the University of California at Irvine, where he completed his residency in cardiothoracic surgery. He is double board certified in general surgery and cardiovascular/thoracic surgery, and is a member of the American College of Surgeons, the American College of Cardiology and the American College of Chest Physicians. Locally, Dr. Pang is a member of the Arizona Medical Association and the Maricopa County Medical Society.

Lipo-Ex assists in the reduction of visceral-fat accumulation that has been associated with, among other conditions, coronary artery disease.



It was this training and commitment to saving lives that led Dr. Pang to Arizona, where he was the first surgeon in Scottsdale to perform minimally invasive open/ beating heart surgery in 1997. Since then he has performed numerous heart and lung procedures.

With these accomplishments, it may seem unusual to see Dr. Pang performing more cosmetic procedures like laser vein ablation and, more recently, a breakthrough, noninvasive fat-reduction procedure called Lipo-Ex. As Dr. Pang explains, however, some of these procedures have a link to his cardiothoracic practice.

WHAT MAKES YOU LOOK GOOD MAY ALSO MAKE YOU HEALTHIER

Over the years, Dr. Pang's aesthetic practice has added various cosmetic procedures as his patients have requested them, including cosmetic laser therapies and laser hair removal. Some of these procedures, however, have made a difference in his patients' lives. One example is varicose veins. Varicose veins are more than just a cosmetic nuisance, as Dr. Pang explains, "Varicose veins and venous insufficiency is a painful disease that can lead to skin ulcers and blood clots. Fungal infections can happen due to a build up of fluid in the legs due to faulty vein valves. What's more, varicose veins do not heal and disappear by themselves."

Dr. Pang has personally treated more than 1,000 patients with varicose veins using EndoVenous Laser Treatment, the leading laser treatment for varicose veins. This treatment is a proven, safe and effective alternative to surgery. Dr. Pang's vein treatment center also performs several other cutting-edge vein treatments to combat all forms of vein disease, from mild and cosmetic to more serious and disabling.

Dr. Pang has taken the success he's seen with his vein patients and expanded further, now looking to help patients suffering from excess fat.

A LARGE AND DANGEROUS PROBLEM

The current average American adult female weight is 163 pounds. More than 3.8 million Americans weigh over 300 pounds. Without a doubt, obesity is the largest health threat facing the United States, which now claims the dubious title of the world's most overweight country in the world. With almost two-thirds of all adults classified as overweight, and 31% of the population characterized as obese, fat is the new epidemic.

Visceral fat, also known as organ fat, is located inside the peritoneal cavity, the location of several vital internal organs. An excess of visceral fat creates the "pot belly" or "beer belly" effect, and a more "apple" like shape. Visceral-fat accumulation has been associated with insulin resistance, glucose intolerance, dyslipidemia, hypertension and coronary artery disease. "Visceral fat is ultimately one of the key indicators of morbidity and mortality, so anything one can do to try to reduce this is going to help a person's health overall," Dr. Pang stresses.

MELTING AWAY FAT — THIS TIME IT'S FOR REAL

Every American has heard the phrase on TV or the radio at least one time in their lives, if not 1,000 times: "Melt away that fat!" The claim is usually associated with a mail-order product with little if any medical grounding, and if there is any efficacy involved it has more to do with altering metabolism or burning calories, not by melting anything. In those cases, melting away fat is more of a euphemism — a call to action rather than a claim.

A new procedure, however, is about to lay waste to the emptiness of that claim. By combining radiofrequency energy and an electrical engineer's eye toward cellular biology, a form of radiofrequency-assisted lipoplasty called Lipo-Ex can literally melt visceral-fat tissue without harming other body tissues. What's more, the procedure does not involve surgery or even injections.

Dr. Pang is the first — and currently the only — medical practice in Arizona with the Lipo-Ex system. "This is a nonsurgical, noninvasive way of dealing with fat," says Dr. Pang. "It is good for treating obesity. It is good for cellulite. This is actually good for aesthetic treatment because you can do some skin tightening with it. It seems to also have some benefit in terms of pain management and sports medicine rehabilitation or after surgeries. This seems to have some type of a very positive affect on reducing pain levels, so that's sort of an extra bonus."

According to Dr. Pang, while Lipo-Ex is poised to help many Americans lose fat quickly, it's not a cure or quick fix for obesity. "It's not a panacea," he says. "There are other ways that people now go about to get rid of fat. The simplest is diet, but look at all the diets and all the people and it doesn't seem to work that well. The other extreme is to have liposuction, but that involves general surgery, a hospital stay and the associated risks. It's also very painful. Then there is a spectrum of treatments in between. What this is, is a nonsurgical noninvasive way of dealing with the fat and I think it has a lot of potential."

HOW IT WORKS

Dr. Pang offers an overview of how the treatment works: "Radiofrequency electric fields are created. There are two electrodes, and what happens when you create this electrical field [is] you get an effect sort of like a microwave. The water molecules in the fat move faster and faster, creating heat, and so the fat will start to melt, and then the body just flushes it away. That's the *Reader's Digest* version, but there's a little bit more to it than that."

International studies have shown that Lipo-Ex treatments can reduce up to 10 pounds and 3 inches in body fat circumference in just six weeks, without the need for needles, surgery or downtime. CT scans confirm a sizeable reduction in visceral-fat loss.

Lipo-Ex is a simple technique, using bipolar radiofrequency to increase the body's core temperature, but only just enough to dissolve fat cells only. "You want to get rid of fat but you don't want to get rid of nerves or muscles or tendons or other important structures, just fat," Dr. Pang adds.

Lipo-Ex is a form of radiofrequency-assisted lipoplasty, which uses radiofrequency current to break down fat tissue. This is quite different from other available fat-removal techniques, such as the controversial mesotherapy, which involves injecting various chemical combinations under the skin to dissolve fat, as well as liposuction surgery and other invasive procedures. Having this procedure is quite similar to having an ultrasound. Typically, five treatments are required, taking about 15-20 minutes each.

“At the surface of the skin, the charge changes its polarity from positive to negative, or bipolar, and so then you kind of get this reciprocating field, and what happens then is that the molecules that are in the fat kind of rotate back and forth because you change the polarity. Now, as the radiofrequency current passes through the body, it encounters different electrical resistances, and this is dependent upon the water content of the tissue that the current goes through. So the more water that’s in the tissue, the more the resistance,” Dr. Pang elaborates. “Fat cells are full of fluid, making it one of the most resistant to radiofrequency.”

Because fat cells are more electrically resistant than other cells, fat cells will start to break down at a lower temperature than other body tissues — specifically at 41° Celsius (105.8° F). “Because of this lower melting point for fat, we can use the Lipo-Ex to selectively heat and release melted fats,” Dr. Pang notes. “And not just from subcutaneous fat and cellulite, but also the very dangerous visceral fat, which lies beneath the muscle wall and surrounds vital organs.”

LIPO-EX CONTRAINDICATIONS

As exciting as this new procedure may be, Lipo-Ex is not for

Herman Pang, M.D.



PHOTO BY KING LAWRENCE

everyone. “You have to be reasonably healthy in order to do this, and there are some adverse effects and contraindications,” Dr. Pang explains. People with pacemakers cannot have this procedure, as well as people who have metal implants in the area to be treated. Women who are pregnant or are breastfeeding, and anyone with uncontrolled hypertension or uncontrolled diabetes are not candidates for Lipo-Ex. “Also, if somebody is on chemotherapy or they’re getting radiation therapy, we don’t do this,” adds Dr. Pang. “They have to be cancer free for five years before we’ll offer this to them.” He adds that even people with a cold or the flu will have to wait until they’re better to get this treatment.

The adverse side effects of treatment are quite mild. “Some people may feel a tingling or a warm sensation during treatment, but many people don’t feel anything at all. Immediately following the treatment there’ll be a little erythema, a little redness,” he continues. “You can get a little bit of dryness or itching. Women who are menstruating may possibly have a slightly increased menstrual flow, but these are very minor feelings and adverse effects.” Dr. Pang adds that they apply a silicone conductor gel to help minimize any skin irritation during treatment, and use an aloe vera or similar moisturizer to the skin after treatment to reduce the chance of any itching or dryness.

One of the keys to getting the greatest efficacy from Lipo-Ex treatments is to drink plenty of water after the treatments. “That’s because what happens is that, as you destroy or melt the fat, the body has to get rid of it somehow,” explains Dr. Pang. “And what will happen is that most of the fat will go into your circulation and mainly into the lymphatic system, and then from there it gets excreted. But you need to help out that process by drinking lots of water. Now, if somebody has uncontrolled diabetes, their fluid status is already all over the board, and they may already be peeing too much anyway. So if someone with uncontrolled diabetes gets this treatment and they don’t drink any more water, they can get very dehydrated and go into shock. That’s why they need to have their diabetes under control before we’ll consider them for this treatment.”

A LEANER FUTURE

Dr. Pang is excited about the results that are possible for his patients who choose Lipo-Ex. “The end result is that not just the surface fat, but the deep fat, the visceral fat, the fat that you can’t see that’s on the inside, gets dissolved because the radiofrequency breaks down the fat cells and not only do you lose weight, but you lose sizes. Since fat weighs less than muscle and other tissues, you may not lose as much weight per se, but you’ll definitely go down in sizes.”

Please call (480) 661-4761 or visit www.entebelloscottsdale.com for more information. ■

Herman Pang M.D. is a leading varicose vein surgeon, treating varicose veins and spider veins. His office accepts most insurance plans.