

## New Scientist and Greenpeace Science Debates

### Science, technology and our future: the big questions

#### The Search for perfection

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#### **Kathy Phillips, Associate Editor, Vogue**

**Kathy Phillips:** It's most unfair that I have to follow this I think! I suppose you could say that, coming from Vogue, I don't live in the real world and I live in a rarefied world of beautiful people but I feel I ought to talk about, not so much conclusions and questions to this debate, but actually my experience from the perspective of my readers and the people that I'm writing for and some actual facts about who is having cosmetic surgery and what they're doing and how much. If we look at the figures, for instance, surgeons are carrying out more than 20,000 cosmetic procedures a year currently, with Botox as the most popular choice.

Britons currently spend £180m a year on Botox injections and laser skin resurfacing. When it comes to hard-core surgery, the UK now is third only to Brazil and the United States in their spending on aesthetic enhancement via the scalpel and the more serious cosmetic procedures. This makes them the biggest spenders in Europe. Now, I'm not talking about anything to do with genetics. I'm talking about sheer, I want to be a bit prettier and this is what I'm going to do, so this is a fact. Admittedly, women do make up 83% of these people undergoing operations but men are increasingly following suit. They are not only finding time for grooming, beauty treatments and therapies, they are having surgical procedures, particularly nose jobs and chin implants to enhance their looks and their potential. So men, you know, are catching up with women, is the point I'm making.

These figures will undoubtedly grow now that last week Botox was given approval by the FDA in America for cosmetic use. I am sure I don't need to tell you about Botox

because it's been used for up to twenty years to help facial palsy and twitches and in the ophthalmic arena until recently. About nine years ago it was discovered that if you use it to freeze the forehead muscles (I'm sure I'm telling you what you know) and the sides of the eyes, wrinkles would never appear in the first place, if you start having Botox injections early enough. I hope you're all listening! And the results of Botox injections guarantee a youthful, fresh appearance and after 20 years of use in the facial palsy arena, there have been no terrible side effects so everybody feels very confident that it's a feature positive and, as we know, people are already spending millions. But, although Botox is the most written about in the media, of one of what we call a quick fix, a sort of facelift in your lunch hour procedure, there are many others which include injections of collagen, a raft of fillers, some made of cut up bits of their bodies, (It's quite disgusting what some of the fillers are made of) which are injected in wrinkles and nasal areas and lines, to enhance youth with large and plump lips as you may have seen.

Then there's laser resurfacing as well as acid peeling to take off the top layers of the epidermis, remove fine lines and wrinkles and encourage new and smoother skin. Thanks to the Americans, as Tom already mentioned, teeth bleaching, major teeth working through veneers to perfect the smile is a new growth area as well as vein treatments on capillaries, removal of moles for aesthetic reasons, not just because of the risk of melanoma and a huge trend in what is known as semi-permanent makeup. There are women walking about (and perhaps men) with tattooed eye brows, tattooed lip line as well as eye lash perms and eye lash dying. You may laugh but I know it to be true.

Then there is simple procedures with lasers like zapping your brown spots of sun, light therapy facials, acupuncture facials. I could go on and on about the treatments that people are having. When it comes to the big guns, major plastic surgery now popular includes the full facelift and I've watched many of these procedures. I've watched a facelift, I've watched a brow lift, liposuction on the sides of the chin. Men are having this too. Nose jobs, eyelid enhancement – that's the upper and the lower lids – tummy tucks, breast enlargements and reductions and I have to mention here for men, penis enlargements. This is all happening regularly. The demand for it is growing and, in many cases, men and women sign up for any number of procedures not only in their 50s and 60s but nowadays in their late 20s and early 30s, doing only the minimum of checking the credentials of the person performing the operations, almost as if it was as easy as buying a new lipstick.

This may sound daunting, illogical and, to some, even immoral but in Japan, and I'm sure in other areas of Asia, the situation is even more scary. The Japanese, quick to want everything new, have discovered cosmetic and plastic surgery in a big way. What they want is more than perfection. They want to deny and alter their genetic heritage. They are being operated on to round their slanted eyes, to sculpt their cheeks and deny their moon-like faces and to curl and dye their straight dark hair. They want perfection but they want perfection as they perceive it from other cultures, which I think is a very interesting trend. They want Slavic cheekbones, Scandinavian blond hair, American height and Caucasian blue eyes.

There may be some in this audience who would say that, and I'm sure I'm going to be accused of this later, these vain attempts to try and improve ourselves genetically, chemically or cosmetically is something that's been encouraged by the media, indeed by magazines such as Vogue that set up standard of aesthetics that are impossible to reach. Pictures of thin girls encourage anorexia, pictures of brown girls promote sun worship and airbrushed pictures of beautiful specimens promote neuroses and dissatisfaction amongst those of us that fall short but it has always been there. People have always suffered for beauty since the Romans tried to dye their hair blond using ashes and sulphur and the Elizabethans whitened their faces with lead.

From where I stand, it makes no difference what any of us think. We would be able to do little to stem the demand for these procedures on moral, physical or financial grounds. We can wave pictures of Lisa Minnelli's wedding guests at people. What has been described as the night of a thousand facelifts. We can show them close-ups of Michael Jackson's nose and Al Pacino's false teeth and any number of Hollywood stars with trumped up lips and injection faces have been lifted up and up away that make them look faintly ridiculous but, believe me, they will still be tempted into the operating theatre.

I think it's thanks to the speed of delivery of information by TV, satellite and print media and, regardless of whether I think genetic fixing is misleading, inaccurate or even downright dangerous, people still go on and want more. I mean, for instance, did you know that more people die from liposuction in America than they do from car accidents? The trouble is that in life we know that the pretty girl gets the job, the photogenic film star gets the part, regardless of her tactics or talent. The blonde at the checkout counter gets more customers. The supermodel gets the best looking ad. The best looking couple gets all the attention.

A psychiatrist I talked to recently said that the majority of her patients now were 30 something men and women who seem to her to be not only attractive but successful and rather well off but they came to her with anxiety complexes. This was not their perception. From the inside they saw themselves as not good enough, not attractive, successful or wealthy enough. They felt their lives should be better, that somehow they were failing. How easy it is to go from that stage to the next and believe that the nose job or the eyelid lift will change your life? That the one or two small procedures in your lunch hour will transform your okay existence into the enviable lifestyle of media couples like the Beckhams?

However, when I've asked an eminent plastic surgeon who spends his days on serious reconstructive work for genetically damaged children or rebuilding faces following accidents, whether he would dissuade the private cosmetic client from what must seem like an operation of vanity, he will always maintain that the simple, face-lifting procedures can change people's lives by giving them a confidence they were never born with and that it gives them extreme satisfaction.

It's very sad to think that an ugly nose or a big bottom can ruin or even preoccupy someone's life but there is proof that it can. Society has become hooked on the feel good factor of looking good as well as the possibility of having it all. Why lead a disciplined, healthy life, eat carefully, stay out of the sun, away from alcohol and drugs when skill and modern technology can make you look as though you have.

We are all seeking to look good and this we are led to believe are the tickets to everything else. Opportunity, talent, happy marriage, children, wealth and influence. The patients needing therapy for anxiety are hoping for a magic wand or a magic laser to be waved over their lives and this is not about trying to stop a husband running off with a younger woman or looking young in order to keep a job. It is a quest for self-respect and confidence boosting in an increasingly dog eat dog world.

There is a strange hypocrisy and double standard in all this because in the circles, fashionable circles you may call them, there is now a surge in the seeming need for spirituality. I know that this is going to come up next, so I'm not going to talk about it, but we know about the film star who does yoga, and meditates and chants and learns to accept herself and yet sees nothing contradictory or neurotic in the need to alter and hopefully perfect her appearance at the same time. We also know about the beautiful super model who we learned had a serious drug problem although she seemingly has a perfect life.

But even these salutary stories don't deter us. The quest for beauty is surely a triumph of hope over experience and as soon as geneticists can treat an embryo to produce a blonde haired blue eyed long limbed baby by choice, there will be a customer for any amount of guaranteed perfection.

There are a few beauty writers, and I am one of them, who feel that growing old gracefully is still the preferred option. I agree with a friend of mine who also happens to be a distinguished English dermatological surgeon when he said he is sure that you can do as much with makeup techniques, exercise, good cosmetics, good diet and good genes as you can with all the surgical remoulding.

But being able to tweak our genes won't protect us from the damage of too much sun exposure, bad diet and no exercise. But I am realistic and pragmatic enough to know that developments in the cosmetic field will entice a growing clientele of both sectors whatever the price. Despite this, I am certain that the future population of Barbie Dolls won't be necessarily content. I'm not sure that perfection leads to contentment and in my experience it very often leads to more insecurity and ultimately more surgery. Give me a widely creative manic-depressive with a crooked nose any day.

