

Nonphysicians Practicing Medicine: A Consumer Safety Issue

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Over the last decade, dermatologic surgeons have been the pioneers in safe and effective rejuvenation of the skin. Advances in laser technology and techniques have yielded as much as 80% permanent hair reduction. New injectable filler substances greatly improve wrinkles, furrows, and scarring of the skin. The ability to remove the signs of photoaging with laser resurfacing, nonablative therapy, chemical peeling, and microdermabrasion underscores the vigorous science, research breakthroughs, and clinical innovations that are hallmarks of the dermatology and dermatologic surgery specialties.

In the past 4 years, the incidence of complications from nonphysicians performing cosmetic skin surgery procedures has risen dramatically. In a recent survey by the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery (ASDS), approximately 45% of respondents reported seeing an increase in the number of patients treated over the past year for complications such as burns, splotching, irreversible pigmentation, and scarring.¹ These complications were attributed to estheticians, cosmetic technicians, and employees of physicians who perform various medical procedures outside their scope of training with inadequate or no physician supervision.

In response to this proliferation of complications due to cosmetic procedures at spas, salons, and walk-in clinics performed by nonphysicians, the ASDS urges consumers to ask questions and make informed decisions about their cosmetic surgery procedures. Make sure the doctor is on-site and immediately available. Ask questions: How many times has this person performed the procedure? Is the person board certified in a cosmetic skin surgery specialty such as dermatology? Are there before-and-after pictures to view? Are there side effects? Is this laser or technique for hair removal or skin rejuvenation appropriate for your skin type? Ask for a patch test.

To guide medical professionals and ensure public safety, the ASDS also has issued position statements on the nonphysician practice of medicine. Under

appropriate circumstances and in accordance with state statutes, physicians may delegate certain procedures to certified or licensed nonphysician personnel. If a medical procedure involving the entrance to living tissue (ie, below the stratum corneum or dead cell layer) is not being performed directly by a physician, the supervising physician should be physically present on-site, immediately available, and able to respond promptly to any questions or problems that may occur while the procedure is being performed.

Unfortunately, state laws only cloud the issue of regulating the use of laser/light sources by nonphysicians. Only 15 states require a doctor to be the one who operates a laser. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia differ on who is permitted to perform procedures and whether they require direct or on-site supervision. The remaining 18 states do not have positions on laser procedures. Furthermore, there are no laws that require nonphysicians or physicians to report complications, except for new Florida regulations.

The bottom line is that nonphysicians are not trained to diagnose skin disease or to evaluate the causes and types of skin conditions related to aging and sun-damage, including wrinkles. Nonphysicians are therefore ill-equipped to treat these disorders and potential complications without medical supervision. Consumers who are treated by a nonphysician for cosmetic dermatologic services also are deprived of the correct diagnosis and treatment of skin diseases, including rosacea, precancers, skin cancer, scarring, wrinkles, and other skin conditions.

In short, marketing and pricing should not supplant logic and sound judgment in the practice of medicine. For more information on skin surgery treatments and referrals to board-certified dermatologic surgeons, consumers should contact the ASDS hotline at 800-441-2737 or log on to its Web site at: www.aboutskinsurgery.com.

REFERENCE

1. American Society for Dermatologic Surgery. ASDS finds increase in complications: due to non-physician practice of medicine. *ASDS Currents*. September-October 2001;1-2.

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