

Beware 'white-coat deception' with surgeons



Nicole Brochu
On Health

Like many women seeking a little surgical assist to improve their appearance, the California stay-at-home mom thought nothing of going back under the knife to replace her leaky breast implants.

Sadly, Dinora Rodriguez made what experts say is a risky and increasingly common mistake: At her friend's recommendation, she chose a doctor without checking his credentials to ensure he was board-certified and adequately trained in plastic surgery.

He wasn't.

The unqualified surgeon so botched the job that Rodriguez made national headlines for

the painful deformity he left her with: a "uni-boob," known in medical terms as symmastia.

The 40-year-old awoke from what she expected to be a simple procedure to find that her new implants were pushed together in the middle, creating one large mass and causing her excruciating pain. If that weren't bad enough, Rodriguez also discovered that, without her consent, her adventurous doctor had taken it upon himself to "fix" a scar near her eyes, giving her a lift that has since prevented her from closing her eyes.

Experts around the country believe that because the non-board-certified doctor was not properly trained, he didn't know how to correctly perform either procedure, leaving Rodriguez with lasting

*Please turn to **SURGEONS, 10G***

SURGEONS

Continued from Page 1G

medical issues. While her implants can be fixed, though at considerable expense, her eyes cannot.

The scary part is that Rodriguez is far from alone in trusting the wrong doctor.

More patients are signing up for plastic surgery procedures performed by physicians with little or no background, training or certification in the field.

"There is a lot of deception out there," said Dr. Malcolm Z. Roth, president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. "There are dermatologists, internists, pediatricians, you name it, who never held a knife in their training, but in their own office, they are the chief of surgery."

The ASPS is so concerned about this growing trend that it has a name for it: white-coat deception — in a society that has long revered the medical profession, people believe that just because someone wears a white coat, he is up to any surgical task.

It's a risky assumption. Various medical specialties are so complex, especially when they involve cutting someone open under anesthesia, that they require detailed training, evaluation and ethical pledges before specialists can be declared qualified. That's what the American Board of Medical Specialties and its 24 approved specialty boards, like the American Board of Plastic Surgery, do.

But remarkably, despite the dangers, there is no law preventing any doctor with a medical license from practicing a specialty he was not trained in.

So the ASPS, with the help of Rodriguez and member physicians in South Florida, is getting the word out with a national awareness campaign to make sure consumers do their homework before letting anyone perform plastic surgery on them.

At the top of the to-do list: Make sure the physician is certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery, which requires a high level of training, superior test scores, adequate experience and a strict code of ethics. And don't be fooled by copycat boards (like anything with "cosmetic surgery" in the title) that have none of the same standards or legitimacy.

"It's an additional step to make sure at least that the physician has gone through rigorous training procedures," said Dr. Shashi Kusuma, a board-certified plastic surgeon in Plantation. "Physicians who are not certified are not held to the same standards and can do whatever they want, and patients don't know the difference."

The warning to take heed is especially critical for Florida, the sun-kissed land of the beauty-conscious, where the number of doc-

Certification checklist

Follow these tips to ensure your doctor has training to perform your plastic surgery procedure.

Ask if your doctor is board-certified in surgery by the American Board of Surgery.

Look for a certificate in the doctor's that includes the seal of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

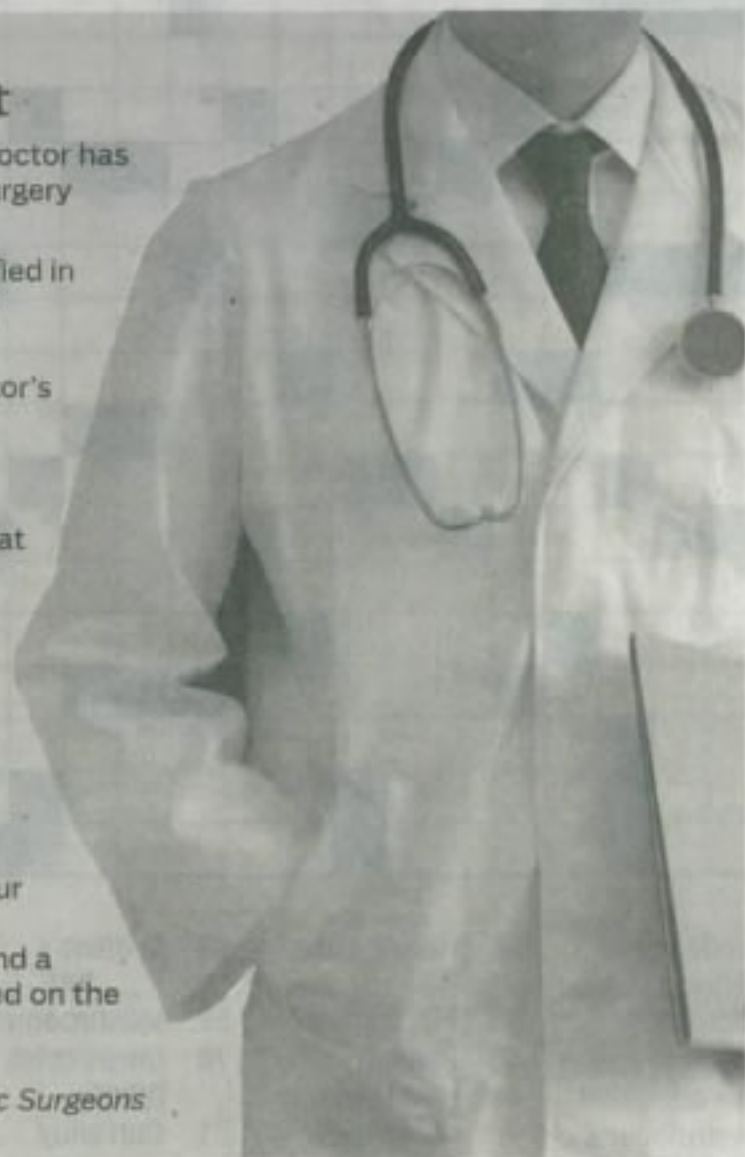
Ask if your doctor has privileges at receiving hospital, in case of an emergency complication.

Ask if your doctor has hospital privileges for the procedure performed.

Make sure the facility where procedure is being performed is accredited.

If you have any doubts about your doctor's certification, go to plasticsurgery.org and click on "Find a Surgeon" to see if he or she is listed on the site.

Source: American Society of Plastic Surgeons



tors' offices registered to perform plastic surgery ballooned from 285 in 2004 to more than 400 today — half of them opening up in South Florida, according to a recent Sun Sentinel examination of state records.

"It's the Wild West down in Florida," Roth said.

He means that ours is a state that has seen more than its fair share of deaths and hospitalizations from botched plastic surgery procedures, so much so that the state Board of Medicine passed some of the strongest rules in the nation restricting cosmetic surgery performed in doctors' offices. And Florida is one of just four states with tough "truth in advertising" requirements of doctors in divulging their training.

But there's nothing to stop doctors who have not been cleared or certified by the ABPS from taking what Kusuma calls "weekend courses" to learn supposedly "non-invasive" procedures like liposuction and offering those services for deep discounts to the public. And if patients don't know enough to ask about the doctors' background and training, they may be signing themselves up for a nightmare.

Dr. Harry Moon, a board-certified plastic surgeon in Fort Lauderdale, said he has "more and more" patients coming to him to fix the botched jobs: Patients who lost a bunch of

weight and went in for skin removal and body contouring, only to come away with severe infections and poor surgical results; or those who had face-lifts, liposuction or breast augmentations that went wrong under the direction of doctors who didn't know what they were doing.

Often, Moon said, the patients were lured by the growing proliferation of TV and billboard come-ons advertising a smorgasbord of cosmetic procedures for cut-rate prices — half off, or more, of the usual rate.

"As the economy contracts, patients are trying to save money and practitioners are looking for ways to improve revenue, and they're getting squeezed in the middle," with sometimes devastating results, Moon said. "Patients are trying to save on the front end, but it becomes very, very expensive, and sometimes life-threatening, on the back end."

The key, Roth said, is for patients to thoroughly check out the doctors they are trusting with their lives.

"This is elective surgery. There is no emergency," he said. "You're talking about your life here. Even in the best of circumstances, things can go wrong. You want to maximize your chances of a safe outcome."

nbrochu@tribune.com