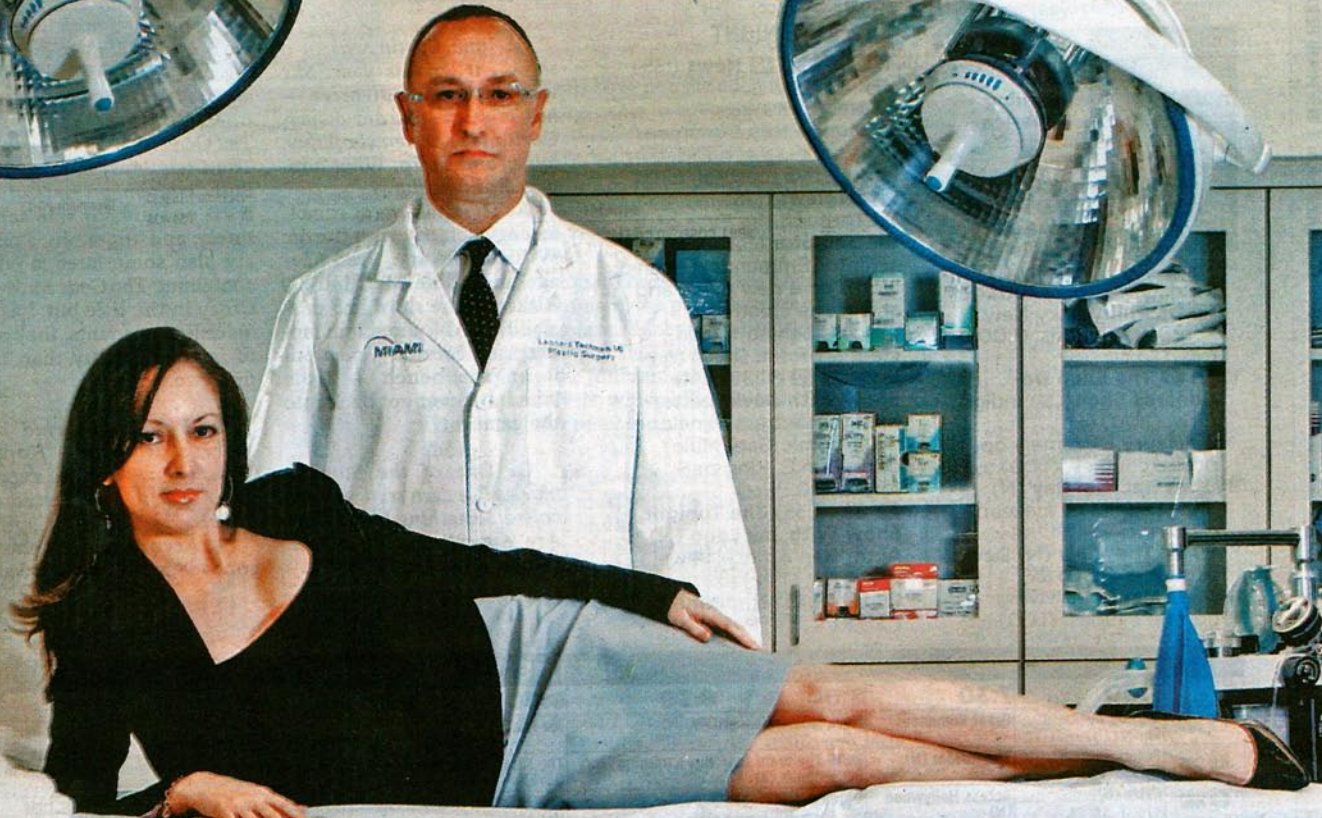


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Addicted to beauty: When cosmetic surgery becomes an obsession



BY MADELEINE MARR

First things first

Helen Leon, 32, is a pretty young thing. Bebe Neuwirth with a dash of Gloria Estefan.

In December, the Miami real estate agent had breast implants, rhinoplasty and a blepharoplasty (fat sucked out of the lower eyelid). Ballpark: \$17,000.

"I figured I'm in my 30s now, it was time for a tuneup," says Leon. "My puffy eyes always made me look exhausted, and my chest was so flat that clothes didn't fit."

Leon's nose, a problem since she fractured it a few years ago, is a major improvement. The results from the other procedures -- done in one day at the Miami Institute for Age Management & Intervention -- are less remarkable. She's so skinny it's hard to know what her breasts would be like if she gained a little weight. And her eyes looked fine before.

No matter, she's a changed woman. "I feel more confident now," says Leon, who would be open to more surgery in her 40s. "It's amazing."

AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

COSMETIC SURGERY: Dr. Julio F. Gallo performs a face-lift at The Miami Institute for Age Management & Intervention. More than 10.2 million cosmetic surgery procedures were performed in the United States in 2005, up 11 percent from 2004.

Leon likely hasn't read the cautionary memoir-exposé *Beauty Junkies: Inside Our \$15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery* (Doubleday, \$24.95) by New York Times style writer Alex Kuczynski. If she had, she might have stopped at the schnozz.

The author speaks from experience. At the wizened age of 38 -- after spending over \$50,000 on self-improvements including countless Botox injections starting at age 27; a blepharoplasty; and, ouch, liposuction on the bum -- Kuczynski has slammed on the brakes. Hasn't had a thing done since October 2005, and frankly, never looked better. Gone are the bleached locks, blood-red lips and glamour-queen lashes.

Blame the return to au naturel on a mortifying lip-plumping experience three years ago. A shot of Restylane (hyaluronic acid, a gelatinous substance found in rooster combs and human joints) didn't take too well.

"I stopped at the doctor's office after the funeral of a dear friend [ex-New York Post editor Jerry Nachman]," she recounts from her Upper East Side home. My top lip blew up like a yam and I had to miss the reception where I was making a speech. I know my friend was laughing at me down from heaven saying, "You fool!"

Unpleasant wake-up call (steroids tamed the problem). But why start in the first place? Seemingly not for a man. The statuesque, Lima-born hottie started dating now-husband Charles Stevenson, a private investor 21 years her senior when she was just 32 (they married two years later). The motivation was more personal.

"There are two reasons people do plastic surgery and the like -- sexualization or rejuvenation. For me it was [the latter]. I had started a fun, easier job and I finally had time to pick up dry cleaning, do things like that," she says. "I'd researched the topic extensively and the idea of making myself look younger, better, began to fascinate me."

She's not the only one. More than 10.2 million cosmetic plastic surgery procedures were performed in the United States in 2005, up 11 percent from 2004, according to the last available statistics released by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

Apparently, we're more influenced by TV shows *The Swan*, *Extreme Makeover* and *Dr. 90210* than AwfulPlasticSurgery.com, a website that posts disturbing pictures of addicts like Manhattan socialite Jocelyn Wildenstein, who demanded the face of a cat -- and got it.

"Women like that are clearly not connected to reality," says Kuczynski. "Their features are weird tipoffs, making them appear fearful and needy."

The site also lampoons Meg Ryan's overblown lips, Tara Reid's disastrous boob job and Mickey Rourke's chipmunk cheek implants.

Let them be a lesson to you -- even celebs get poor medical advice. That's why it's so essential that prospective patients be smart, prudent and in control.

"I've rarely been to a plastic surgeon without them trying to upsell me," Kuczynski says. "Like a waiter trying to get you to order a more expensive wine or fancy bottle of water."

She blames the add-on mentality partly on insurance reimbursement hassles. "The medical environment has changed from, say, 10 or 15 years ago. Doctors don't need to spend an hour scraping off a freckle anymore," she says. "They'll do Botox instead, for a bigger payout, cash in hand."

Botox, which contains minute amounts of Botulinum toxin type A, causing muscle paralysis, only lasts about six months. At \$500-plus a pop, you do the math. In fact, 3.8 million Botox injections were given in 2005; docs collectively billed almost \$1.4 billion. Who's afraid of needles?

Corinne Chaney, for one, is committed to the long haul. The 44-year-old started with Botox at 40 to zap her "elevens," the vertical creases between the eyes called the glabella. "I'm not a mean person and I had a scowl mark," says the recent divorcée, who lives in West Miami. She's since had half-a-dozen injections to her forehead, as well as rhinoplasty, breast implants and sclerotherapy (removal of hereditary varicose veins).

"I look much better and am ready to date again," Chaney says, "but I wonder how I will afford it." (She's currently unemployed.)

Kuczynski understands this mentality all too well. "So I couldn't pay my mortgage," she says, "at least I didn't have lines between my eyes."

Even the reformed beauty junkie never says never.

"I don't think I'll get anything else," she says, "but then I hear from ladies in their 60s saying, 'Honey, just you wait.'"