Overview
It is unknown exactly how much cosmetic surgery is being performed in Australia. This is due partly to the fact that most cosmetic surgery is elective, and as such these procedures are not covered by Medicare. The other contributing factor is that so many different practitioners perform cosmetic surgery, ranging from Specialist Plastic Surgeons to General Practitioners (GPs), dermatologists and beauticians. Common forms of cosmetic surgery include breast augmentation, rhinoplasty, labiaplasty, and dermal fillers (facial injectables). Cosmetic surgery has become a billion-dollar industry in Australia.

Many factors have been cited as driving increased uptake of cosmetic surgery in Australia such as an ageing population, cosmetic surgery for weight management, the rise of 'injectables' such as botoxTM, increased exposure to social media (especially Instagram), appearance concerns and psychological and emotional distress, and the marketing of cosmetic surgery as preventative (rather than corrective). This has correlated with a rise in uptake from younger women in particular.

Cosmetic surgery is often seen as an individual choice. However, this disregards the collective pressure that women in particular are under to meet unrealistic beauty standards. In a society where young women report being valued more highly for their looks than for their brains or their ability, cosmetic surgery may appear to be an reasonable investment for many women – despite the potential risks and costs involved, particularly when things go wrong.

While boys and men are affected by body image dissatisfaction, girls and women tend to be disproportionately affected for a range of reasons including that women’s social capital is often intertwined with their appearance and perceived attractiveness. Demand for certain forms of cosmetic surgery such as eyelid surgery and ‘Brazilian butt-lifts’ also seem to reflect values related to racism and whiteness.

Much of the existing critique of the cosmetic surgery sector comes from Specialist Plastic Surgeons, the government and regulators and tends to focus on the need to regulate ‘dodgy providers’ rather than taking a broader look at the drivers of cosmetic surgery and its meaning and impacts for women and the wider community. In 2017 Australia’s health ministers unanimously agreed to tighten regulations for cosmetic surgery targeting practitioners who call themselves ‘cosmetic surgeons’ without specialised accreditation. They have referred the matter to the Medical Board of Australia who are currently investigating the most appropriate ways to safeguard consumers at the national level.

More research and data is needed in regard to how cosmetic surgery is marketed to women and by whom; women’s experiences and satisfaction post-surgery; and how cosmetic surgery is used to express, police and shape beauty expectations and gender norms in contemporary Australia.

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