

Nose surgery – a three-dimensional art form

Surgery to the nose requires the mind of a scientist and the soul of an artist. Patients can now undergo the procedure using an advanced local anaesthetic technique pioneered by a South African surgeon.

BY ROBERT FVSH

The nose is the single most defining feature of the human face and surgery to change its shape is demanding and complex. It strips a surgeon of any inflated views he cultivates about talent and accomplishment,' says Pieter Swanepoel, South Africa's only dedicated nose surgeon.

'In rhinoplasty we use what I call a left-brain, right-brain technique. A good nose surgeon uses rational, scientific techniques when planning and executing the procedure but, unless he recognises that surgery to the nose is also a three-dimensional art form, it is unlikely he will attain the perfection required for successful cosmetic nose surgery,' he explains. 'You dare not approach this form of surgery lightly. Each nose presents a new, different challenge and requires skills unequalled in many other forms of surgery. The surgeon has to visualise the shape of the nose and what it should look like after surgery. It's an occupation for artists who work with bone, cartilage and flesh.'

Swanepoel is a tall, robust man. He works silently, sometimes with a scalpel, sometimes with a surgical chisel, sometimes with tweezers. Over his left shoulder, projected onto the wall of the specialised theatre, is a multiple image of the patient and various views of the nose. He turns periodically to stare at the picture, imprinting its dimensions into his consciousness. Occasionally, like a craftsman fussily attending the planes and angles of a new creation, he reaches for stainless-steel callipers and squints at the nose on which he is working.

The patient has unusually attractive eyes. Her voice, when she speaks, is low and slow, punctuated with pauses. Sometimes she watches him, her eyes following his deft hand movements.

'How are we doing, doctor?'

'Fine, my girl, just fine. We have a good nose in the making. How are you feeling?'

'Just a little sleepy.'

'That's OK. Sleep if you want to.'

The woman closes her eyes.

'We're using the same local anaesthetic procedure a dentist would use to pull a tooth. We simply block off the nerves around the operative area and relax her with a mild sedative. She's awake but can't feel any pain and when



we're finished she can go home. It's much safer than the debilitating gaseous general anaesthesia used in hospitals.'

Swanepoel pioneered 'conscious sedation' for use in nasal surgery. 'I always felt there was a way of making surgery to the nose simpler, less costly and more comfortable for the patient,' he recalls.

In 1995 the eminent surgeon hung up his English tailored suits and became a medical student over weekends. He consulted medical references on the regional nerve supplies of the human face, dissected cadavers and consulted professors at the University of Pretoria. Finally, at a surgical workshop in California, the blueprint for local anaesthetic crystallised. Huddled with a group of American specialist surgeons around a specially prepared cadaver, Swanepoel says: 'I saw the light. It all made sense, so I came home and we did our first operation, using one of those large dental syringes, at the Rosebank Clinic in Johannesburg.'

Dr Wayne Williams, a South African specialist prosthodontist now living and practising in London, made the next connection. He introduced Swanepoel to Milestone Scientific, an American company that manufactured computer-aided equipment designed to administer minute quantities of anaesthetic at low pressure. The company gave him a prototype machine and asked him to document the results.

In true South African style Dr Swanepoel boldly introduced this technology into his highly specialised field. Painstakingly he and his anaesthetic team refined the techniques, dosages and precise delivery protocol of sedatives and local anaesthetic agents for surgery to the nose.

What is nose surgery? Swanepoel says a stuffy or blocked nose, a dry, irritated throat and a loss of smell and taste could indicate a functional nose problem that requires surgery.

Some people dislike their features intensely and this often undermines their 'self-image' and confidence. A refinement of the nose (and sometimes the chin) changes negative self-image into a positive feeling of self-acceptance. People undergo cosmetic surgery to enhance the shape of their noses, ideally to fit an imaginary triangular overlay that is balanced proportionately to the face. Swanepoel, the principal surgeon at The Nose Clinic in Pretoria, 'uses computer-aided images to shape the nose within these triangular guidelines.

Some patients ask him to correct previous, unsuccessful procedures, most often the result of work by surgeons who don't have the experience, professional focus or advanced training for this

complex field. Surgery of this nature requires care. Old scar tissue from the earlier event sometimes complicates further surgery. 'Errors of omission' are usually easier to correct than 'errors of commission.' Omission implies that the previous surgeon did 'too little' to correct the initial problem. The solution, by implication, is corrective – removing excess tissue and cartilage or bone overlooked in the earlier surgery.

'Commission' errors are more difficult to revise. By implication, the surgeon removed too much tissue, cartilage or bone during previous surgery and any attempt to correct the defects requires abnormal care and skill. 'Human tissue' grafting material or 'bank' cartilage is sometimes required to strengthen the nasal structures.

What happens at the first consultation and why is this consultation so critical to the eventual success of surgery? Swanepoel emphasises that the correct diagnosis is imperative. 'Without a proper, carefully informed diagnosis by an experienced doctor, eventual successful surgery is unlikely,' he explains. 'At the first consultation, we examine the nose under controlled clinical conditions. What I look for depends on the patient's objectives. The examination for a cosmetic procedure entails a careful examination of the shape and size of the nose in relation to the size, contours and planes of the face. The texture and quality of the skin (is it thick and oily or thin and smooth?) is another factor that could affect the outcome of surgery.'

What will the patient look like after surgery? 'We believe our patients should participate in the preparation for this important life-changing procedure. This is far better than waking up after an operation to find that what you got is not what you anticipated or wanted,' he responds.

Swanepoel captures four colour photographs of a patient's face during the first consultation, using sophisticated digital imaging software to create a 'preview' of the enhanced nose – what it would look like after surgery. 'I encourage patients to participate in this procedure and afterwards they take a print-out home to think about and discuss. I also use the image for planning, and the result – when you finally see it – is reflected in the patient's eyes. They shine, and you know you've done a good job.' ■

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