EDITORIAL

The Scope of Plastic Surgery: Beyond Beauty, Beyond Boundaries

I think it is high time to reflect on certain points regarding Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery—to know what Plastic Surgery actually means, what its scope is, and what mystifications/misunderstandings prevail about this specialty in the minds of common people and even among some doctors.

Although some consider Plastic Surgery as a relatively newer art; in fact, it is one of the oldest disciplines of surgery in the world. Sushruta (600 B.C.), acknowledged as the Father of Plastic Surgery, is credited with describing plastic surgical principles in his famous ancient treatise 'Sushruta Samhita'. He was probably the first person to perform plastic surgical operations. All the basic principles of plastic surgery are found in his writings. His knowledge was so profound that he believed that medicine was as essential for a surgeon as his surgical know-how, otherwise, he would be a "bird with a single wing"!

To start with, the name 'Plastic' in itself is quite incomplete and confusing. The name has not been taken from the popular 'synthetic substance' but the Greek word 'plastikos'. The word itself means 'moulding or sculpting', reiterating the fact that it is a moldable branch: ever evolving and refining.

Being one of the ancient disciplines of surgery, as already stated; but to date, still, there has been no consensus on the name befitting the specialty which would conform to the diverse working areas touching all parts and regions of the human body. It is a distinctive specialty that doesn't bear a name that defines it properly. The argument for defying definition is that the various specialties are acknowledged either by their anatomic territory (Bone and Joint; Ear, Nose, and Throat; Ophthalmology), the system involved (Urology, Gastroenterology, Nephrology, Neurology) or by age (as Pediatric Surgery/Geriatric Medicine) and so on. However, Plastic Surgery is a distinctive discipline that is not restricted to any particular region system, or age. It is rather established on certain BASIC SURGICAL PRINCIPLES. So, to call it better- it is a Specialty of Principles rather than Parts (body). These are essentially the root-level postulates for any surgery; however, are being observed in letter and spirit by plastic surgeons in particular. These guiding principles can be translated into any surgical procedure, anatomical region, or organ system to accomplish a successful outcome. Again so, this principle-based nature entitles it to qualify as a 'Problem-Solving Specialty'.

Also, it caters to all body blocks from the skin to bones. So, the simplified argument of some citing plastic surgery as 'surgery of skin' is completely out. But still, the name does not symbolize much to a layman and the medical community at large. The diversity of plastic surgery can be made out by the variety of procedures it is involved in. Congenital defects (cleft lip/ palate, hand deformities, ear/nose deformities, moles and naevi, urogenital deformities), acute trauma, chronic traumatic defects and deformities, acute burn management and burn reconstructions, cancer extirpations, and reconstructions, reattachment of amputated parts of the body, post-traumatic defects on any part of the body, numerous cosmetic procedures like liposuction/ lipofilling, facial rejuvenation, breast surgeries, gender reassignment procedures, hair transplantation, to name a few. Otherwise, the list seems unending.

Plastic Surgery is a broad surgical specialty involving the restoration, reconstruction, or alteration of the human body. Plastic Surgery has been given the eponym 'the problem-solving specialty' as the role of plastic surgeon can be called for in any specialty, be medical or surgical, at any point in

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time. We can hardly come across any surgical discipline wherein plastic surgery does not contribute either as the first or the second line of support. So, some folks even don't hesitate to address plastic surgeons as 'finishers' as they are the final call-takers in several procedures and clinical dilemmas; when many have accomplished their part, they are seeking the services of plastic surgeons for the final stroke to furnish finer brushings by their 'finishing touches'. Historically, it is believed that Mussolini and Adolf Hitler used plastic surgery to create a more “perfect soldier”- supposed to fix the drooping eyelids of the soldiers and anything that made a soldier appear meek or weak. Leaving aside this, it is a charming branch making people more charming and looking more elegant and beautiful.

Nonetheless, many disciplines encounter more and more procedures that overlap with Plastic Surgery. So, in this age, Plastic Surgery is not invariably considered a principal specialty for the procedures which were stereotyped as fundamental and time-honored to it. In such situations, we may call it sharing the care, rather than being antagonistic to one another.

Having said this, there are circumstances wherein a multidisciplinary team approach is required for a more favorable result. Hence, in those areas, the engaged sister specialties cannot be viewed as competitors, but as organs of an alliance operating together in unison to accomplish the desired result. Picking up cleft lip/palate management as a reference, in which, along with a plastic surgeon other specialists like orthodontists, ENT specialists, orthognathic surgeons, audiologists, nutritionists speech therapists, and so on form an integral part of the team, and collaboration and coordination among them all is mandatory for a thriving functional and aesthetic outcome. Likewise, 'Orthoplastic Surgery' and 'Oncoplastic Surgery' had come into existence on a need basis partnership between the respective surgeons and a plastic surgeon. The principles and the practices of two specialties are executed in unison on a clinical problem either by a single service provider or a team of operators working in harmony for the benefit of the patient. This idea has been extensively adopted with remarkable success for a long now.

Thirdly, Plastic Surgery is also known for its dynamicity and ever-evolving character. It has advanced to contribute in many complex areas previously managed by other specialists like general surgeons or orthopedics. Management of diabetic foot is a glowing instance targeting salvage and reconstruction, thereby minimizing the amputation rates. Concurrently, the domain and scope of Plastic Surgery are growing day by day, with further sub-specialization/super-specialization. The realm is increasing so much that it can be confusing to those outside the specialty. Thus, it can be envisaged that although in some areas we are facing competitors, new vistas are opening for us. A lot more remains still unexplored!

Important to mention here is only one thing if anyone requires any plastic surgical consultation or procedure, he/she should seek a call from a board-certified person. This way we may avoid any mishap at the hands of inexperienced persons. It is also the duty of plastic surgeons as a community to make the common public aware of its scope and domain so that better services can be assured for needy people.

More importantly, even today, the knowledge about the scope of plastic surgery remains hazy. Surveys have shown that about one-third of common people relate Plastic Surgery to Cosmetic surgery. Common masses are having the notion of Plastic Surgery as a 'beautification surgery' or, less than that, any surgery that leaves behind no marks or scars. But the truth is that Plastic surgery is not completely scar-free. Like all surgeries, plastic surgery leaves behind scars. However, plastic surgeons are skilled at not only minimizing but also hiding the scars effectively. Even the media is projecting it as a specialty, giving people a new lease of life, and changing the 'face of persons', a concept especially popularized by our Bollywood movies. The reconstructive part of Plastic Surgery (like post-traumatic/congenital deformity correction, burn surgery, and cancer reconstruction) is not portrayed by the press and media. Though it has added glamour to the specialty and earned it a 'darling status in media', it has, however, led to/added a lot of confusion. So many people will look for a plastic surgeon only for some aesthetic procedure, and nevertheless, seek consultation from other disciplines for the procedures which are traditionally plastic surgical procedures.

Again, one more myth connected to plastic surgery is regarding the ageing process. Plastic surgery cannot pause or retard the ageing process. After getting some anti-ageing plastic surgical procedure done, it cannot last forever; people will continue to age and he/she may require the

procedure to be repeated or replicated or a brand-new stratagem.

Talking about aesthetics, technically speaking, in many instances there can be a very thin line between repair and cosmetic surgery. A reconstructive procedure may add to the cosmesis too. If the basic philosophy of 'function taking precedence over cosmesis' is to be followed, then one can say that the function of the face is to look good (appearance) or Breast Reconstruction (a patrimony of womanhood) can be considered as aesthetic reconstructive procedures too.

Plastic surgeons as a community might be accountable for this sorry state of affairs as have not been able to bust these myths. This objective can be procured through talks, symposia, meetings, or advertisements. It's time we step up and enlighten our community about the true potential of plastic surgery—so that its life-changing benefits reach those who need them the most.

Lastly, in the wake of the perpetually stretching territory of plastic surgery, many in the medical fraternity are not cognizant of the variance and multiformity of Plastic Surgery. The enormous diversity in clinical competence and application can be the additional reason for the skepticism of those medical professionals outside it; the reason being that the basic education and principles of Plastic Surgery are not included in the curriculum of our medical schools. It is only after one chooses the specialty; that one comes to know about the realms of the discipline. All this may culminate in the hesitancy of the referring physician. So, we are again duty-bound to make non-plastic surgical colleagues recognize the prerogative of Plastic Surgery through mutual discussions and informal talks.

With so much diversity with insubstantial comprehension about its performance, Plastic Surgery has established itself as a prestigious specialty that is capable of tracking down its role in any medical discipline at any part of patient management.

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