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THE CARING TOUCH

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Nearly 6.9 million cosmetic procedures were performed in 2002, according to a national survey conducted by the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. That's a good indication of the growing interest in improving appearance.

While **Washington University School of Medicine** and **Barnes Jewish Hospital** are probably the first medical options that come to mind if you're really ill, they also specialize in elective procedures.

"Caring for patients is what we do," says Dr. Bruce A. Kraemer of the Department of Cosmetic and Reconstructive Surgery. "Our dedication to excellence and the quality of care we provide isn't any different when the procedure is by choice. In fact, what guides our practice is a simple question: 'can I make this patient happy?'"

The same technical skills used in reconstructive surgeries apply to cosmetic procedures, he points out. "Whether a patient has a minimal issue-like a bump on the nose or ears that don't lie flat-or a serious deformity, their concerns are similar; they want to feel better about their appearance."

Kraemer says the reputation of the anesthesiologists, nurses and other members of the surgical team at Washington University is among the best in the country. "People know us and know about us. They feel confident in our hospital and in the people who care for them." For patients who want to avoid a hospital environment, "We have excellent surgical facilities at Barnes West," he adds.

Kraemer stresses that it's important to spend time with each patient to educate him or her about what to expect from cosmetic surgery.

"An unhappy patient is usually an unformed patient," he notes. "I take as much time as needed to explain the risks and benefits and I like to include the family whenever possible." Family members can be an important source of support, especially during the recovery phase.

A surgeon's job is to help patients understand what lies ahead.

"If they have unrealistic expectations or lives that are too busy and overscheduled, I may encourage them to wait," he says. "The best candidates are at a point in their lives when they can focus on getting well. You need time to consider your decision and time to heal."

One of the most requested surgical procedures is liposuction, a procedure used for body contouring and fat removal. "We always counsel people about their health and any obesity issues," Kraemer says. "Liposuction is no remedy for dietary indiscretions. But if someone has done the hard work necessary to lose 100 or even 200 pounds, 'or they have a genetic predisposition to collecting fat in certain areas, the procedure can be the final step in achieving their goal."

Removing extra skin and stubborn deposits of fat can create the body balance and



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symmetry a patient desires, he explains. He likens body image changes to watching a butterfly emerge from a cocoon. "There's a tremendous amount of gratification in helping someone feel good about themselves again. Whether it's reattaching a hand, and then having that patient reach out to shake your hand, or invigorating people later in life with a face-lift, it's wonderful," Kraemer says.

Another member of the surgical team, [Dr. James B. Lowe III](#), says, "One of the great things about working here is the opportunity to see patients with a variety of issues, both cosmetic and reconstructive. And I can decide who is a good candidate with the right motives.

People are blood and bones, not a piece of rock can be carved to fit some impossible ideal. Being a cosmetic surgeon is about knowledge, training and artistry."

While the specialty seems to have a constant stream of innovations, "Not everything new is better," he says. "We use tried-and-true techniques, but it's very important in plastic surgery to keep up with what's going on. You have to change every half-decade or so."

"Keeping up can be a bit easier at a teaching institution, he says. "We have multiple conferences, go to meetings, and resident training is also a key. They're always asking questions, and I have to be the guy with the answers."

Lowe also believes in spending plenty of time with each patient. "The best patient is one who understands and accepts the risks. I see everyone at least two times prior to surgery. I show them before and after photographs, even close-ups of scars." Although patients may learn a lot about potential surgeries on the Internet, Lowe says, "A patient can't learn what I've trained years to know. You should choose a surgeon you feel confident with, one with whom you establish a good rapport."

He reminds that his specialty is a surgery of millimeters. "That's why it's important to be continually learning. Even the slightest change can make a big difference in the results." He also studies the before-and-after photos. "I'm examining my own results very critically. I'm asking myself, 'How did I do? Am I happy with the final result?' I, as well as the patient, have to be."

An important element of the practice at Washington University is educating patients about skin care. "Less invasive procedures like peels, microdermabrasion and even deeper peels can improve appearance substantially," he says.

"For many patients; once they've undertaken a goad program, they feel they can put off surgery." When the time is right, facial surgeries are about creating symmetry and balance. "Well informed patients may have to consider more than one procedure. Having a young chin and throat may not satisfy you if your eyes look old and tired," he points out.

He has no problem with patients who shop around for a surgeon.

"People come back and tell me they like my approach and feel confident about the quality of care we offer. That's a nice thing to hear. It's all about the patient being happy, and I think they will be if they find a surgeon who cares about them and about the results as much as they do.

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