

Interview with Dr Barry Lycka & Dr Donald Kress

Dr Barry Lycka cosmetic dermatologist from Edmonton, Alberta is talking today with

Dr Donald Kress, board certified plastic surgeon from Frederick, Maryland.

Talking in detail about choosing a plastic surgeon.

Dr Kress has recently written a book called 'Trust Me I'm A Plastic Surgeon' and Dr Lycka has a book out on a similar theme called 'Don't Choose A Cosmetic Surgeon Without Me'.

Why did you write your book, Dr Kress??

Over the years Dr Kress has seen increasing numbers of people who have been injured and damaged by poor plastic surgery, often coming to see him after they have already seen 4 or 5 other plastic surgeons who couldn't help them. It occurred to him that whilst fixing people one at a time was noble, reaching out to many people and teaching them how to make better decisions when choosing plastic surgery could 'head off' the possibilities of them being injured by poor choice and poor plastic surgery. He wrote it to see if it would make a difference to people's lives.

Dr Lycka also wrote his book for the same reasons.

It seems that it's a common sense thing to choose a suitable cosmetic surgeon BUT is common sense really that common, Dr Kress?

No! The frustrating thing is that frequently patients tell Dr Kress that when they had seen other surgeons, even during their first consultation it wasn't that good, they had reservations about the whole thing BUT decided to go ahead anyway, and then years later they are trying to get the poor surgery and damage repaired. Sadly it is not always repairable. So maybe common sense is common BUT people don't seem to always act upon it.

And just asking family, friends, even the family primary care doctor is not suitable and doesn't help. Unless the doctor is them self involved in plastic / cosmetic surgery then they will not know much more about it than another person. Even worse, it sometimes happens that family doctors are a little 'jealous' of plastic surgeons and they maybe do not take the time to fully understand the work of a plastic surgeon and so can give negative or incorrect opinions.

But most dangerous is for patients to assume that they are actually learning something from an individual practitioners website – most of them are sales sites and not educational. There are some exceptions of course and there are some very good educational plastic surgeon / cosmetic surgeon websites around but most are marketing based.

So how does a person evaluate and choose a plastic surgeon?

Number One: They should understand what Board Certification really means. In the USA, The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) (<http://www.abms.org/>) certifies and oversees 24 member boards, and plastic surgery is one of those member boards. Be careful because there are many plastic surgeons out there that don't belong to any boards certified by the ABMS. Some use similar sounding names and claim extra expertise – there is even one pseudo society that even has the word 'board' in its name – but it has no recognition with ABMS.

The ABMS oversees programs, checking they are accurate, ethical, with proper training and testing. There are a few boards which are appropriate for a plastic / cosmetic surgeon, for example oto-rhino-laryngologists (ORL or ENT) – cervical-facial surgeons do spectacular reconstructive surgery.

So the first step is to check board certification and that it is also a relevant certification under the ABMS.

A plastic surgeon in Minnesota highlighted a case where radiologists in their office building had started offering cosmetic surgery – their training in taking x-rays is not at all relevant to the practice of cosmetic surgery! The economic downturn has affected many business sectors including healthcare professionals, so it is tempting for them to view offering cosmetic surgery as some sort of ‘golden parachute’ to get them out of financial trouble! Another example of how easy it is to ‘misread’ board certification was the case of a board certified podiatrist in Florida who decided to offer liposuction surgery, which he was not certified in – he was claiming to be a board certified liposuction surgeon, but of course he was a certified foot doctor.

Number Two: Check that the person has the ability to perform the surgery in a hospital or licensed surgical facility

Number Three: Check with the state and societies that they are affiliated with for any disciplinary actions that will not show up with board certification. For example: a woman with failed multiple plastic surgeries (over 30 thousand dollars worth) discovered that although the surgeon had exemplary board certifications, when she checked with the state, he had had his license revoked 4 times for substance abuse... SCARY!

So the best doctor with the best credentials, and their best work possible should be the base criteria for choosing a cosmetic doctor.

In your opinion Dr Kress, are the best plastic surgeons trained or born into it???

Well we can split plastic surgeons into 2 groups – the engineer types who are trained in it and the artistic types who were born with a natural artistic ability which has been applied to their plastic surgery training.

For example Dr Kress has witnessed one of the currently popular plastic surgeons offer the exact same solution for breast surgery. He talked to 22 women and said exactly the same solution to each of them. Those types of plastic surgeons are very well trained but you wouldn’t necessarily want to go see them.

Dr Lycka commented that a patient wants to see someone who has that natural curiosity to extend the techniques, their knowledge, and the surgeons who like to share their knowledge and who know that the greatest knowledge comes from sharing to generate better ideas. Such skills are innate; such people can communicate very well with others and value ethics above and beyond everything else. Such surgeons suggest what is right for the patient and not what is right for the doctor from a profit point of view.

Dr Kress agrees that the best doctors never lose their sense of curiosity. There are multiple opportunities as doctors progress through their career path to be tempted into doing what’s right for them rather than doing things because it’s ethically correct.

So if someone doesn’t want to do all this work to find a plastic surgeon – what is wrong in going to see their mothers plastic surgeon?

Well maybe nothing! Their mom may have been a very conscientious in selecting her surgeon and has excellent results in which case it can be a very valuable shortcut.

BUT there is danger lurking here due to a thinking process called cognitive dissonance whereby people that have had a poor outcome in something will deal with it (strangely enough) by recommending someone else to them even though they know that really that is not a great idea. An example of this was a lady who visited Dr Kress who had had poor breast surgery results. Even though knowing this, she then sent her daughter to the same surgeon, who also caused problems with her breast surgery.

Patients must be very aware of this effect. If the work was excellent then there is nothing wrong in seeing the same surgeon, but, if the surgery results were not as the patient wanted, or there were problems, then a patient really must go through the entire process of choosing a plastic surgeon themselves.

Moving onto celebrities... for whatever reasons, they pick doctors and get bad results, which is then shared all over the internet! They seem to have all the money, time and resources needed but they don’t choose the right doctor. Why is this do you think, Dr Kress?

Firstly the media greatly exaggerates the ‘bad’ results. For example someone gets a bit of Botox that ruins their face – why is there such a huge fuss when it will be all gone in 4 months or so? There is no need for such fuss.

Secondly when it comes to celebrities, very often bad attention is seen to be preferable to no attention. Take Mickey Rourke – his career was going down, he had terrible plastic surgery then gets lots of starring roles as a bad guy.

The normal process for normal people is that they shop around, talk honestly with their prospective surgeon, using their intuition as well. But with celebrities that valuable process doesn't happen. They probably have some assistant searching for them, and whilst being treated as 'special' that is almost guaranteeing bad results, because whilst being treated as special, they are not getting the usual excellent care and that is when problems can happen.

As a surgeon, you get into a 'groove' where you are following the same steps and techniques that have been developed to deliver the greatest results and excellent standard of care. When moving out of that groove, when deviating from established processes then a surgeon has to think through each stage each time and that is when inconsistencies and problems creep in.

Why do people get dissatisfied after plastic surgery?

The big thing that is hard to deal with is that they expect a certain level of social reaction – and if that doesn't happen then they feel like the results were not acceptable. What they don't realize is that actually people don't look at each other closely. For example we did a great facelift on a woman, she looked refreshed, natural, 10 years younger, she looked great, and her friends asked her if she had had a new hairstyle! People are not that observant, and in any case as cosmetic surgeons we want people to have natural looks, to look so great, rested, refreshed, that actually no-one knows they have had cosmetic surgery.

Dr Kress also notes that this is why all surgeons take before and after photographs. Often people don't even look closely at their own face and never notice that maybe they have one eyelid lower than the other, or one eye doesn't open fully and so on – they never look properly until after their surgery then they are looking at everything. A surgeon can always look back at the before photos and say, look that eye was always like that – nothing was changed by the surgery.

Another major thing is that people completely have the wrong impression about their recovery period, and this mostly comes from 'reality tv' where on TV someone looks fabulous an hour after surgery BUT in real life it could be 3 or 4 months later.

So what do you tell people who are dissatisfied with their cosmetic surgery results?

Firstly there needs to be a serious discussion to get to the detail of what is wrong. But most commonly, they must allow enough time to heal – and how long is that? Well it depends upon the actual procedure but considering any type of revisionary surgery before 6 months is probably foolish, although after 3 months can be reasonable sometimes.

Most importantly, patients must be comfortable having that dialog with their surgeon. This comes back to the patients comfort level when talking with their potential surgeon during the initial consultation process. Whilst talking to them before the surgery, they must think about how comfortable they would feel talking to them if something had gone wrong or they were not happy with their results. If a person feels uncomfortable talking with their surgeon about honest details then that is not a good situation to be in.

Also Dr Kress advises the '2 strikes and you are out' approach. If someone needs a little touchup after 6 months – that is not unusual in cosmetic surgery, BUT if the surgeon can't fix it, then it is time to consult for other opinions. There is however a tendency for people to 'bail' a little too early. There sometimes can be complications – even the best surgeon gets complications happening sometimes but the key to it all is having good communication.

Do you have any more practical words of advice from your book to share with us, Dr Kress?

Einstein said, "Intuition isn't something, intuition is everything". Again this goes back to when a patient is talking through their first consultation. If their intuition is screaming at them "get out of here..." then a person should trust their intuition and listen to it and then act upon it. Dr Lycka adds that patients need to go into their consultation with their eyes wide open. It is their opportunity to learn about the procedure and ask questions but it is also the opportunity for the doctor to evaluate them as a patient and ensure that they are a good candidate for the surgery being proposed.

And finally from Dr Kress: Never take your children to your consultations! No matter what their age, they will only get in the way and acts as distractions.

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