

In Dermatologic Plastic Surgery--- Name is Game

Nothing endures but change.

-Heracleitus

In the last half century dermatology has seen a revolutionary change in the way cosmetic and oncologic surgery is perceived and performed. The increased focus on dermatologic surgery may be surprising to many physicians who trained in the mid twentieth century. However, many founding members of our specialty were originally surgeons who later became interested in skin disease.

The first national dermatologic society, the American Dermatologic Association, was established in 1876. Many of its early members were former civil war military surgeons. Because of the high incidence of venereal or urologic disease, the focus of dermatologists of this era was on both dermatology and venerealology. In 1932 the American Board of Dermatology was established, the fourth specialty board of the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS). Since that time, more effective medical and surgical advances have been developed which have changed our patients' lives and the way we practice medicine.

Since the mid twentieth century, we have seen a resurgence in the importance of surgery in the practice of dermatology. Growing public interest in aesthetic surgery has led to developments in this field. Many of the pioneers in new or refined techniques have been dermatologists, who have used their knowledge in dermatology to "think outside of the box." Dermatology residency or surgical fellowship has provided them a foundation upon which to build surgical experience and expertise. For example, this foundation has led to the concepts of laser utility in the treatment of skin disease, donor dominance in hair transplantation, tumescent liposuction with dilute anesthetic solution and micro-cannulas, Mohs micrographic surgery for cutaneous tumors, and laser and radiofrequency endovascular surgery.

Our roots began in surgery and they continue to grow and expand in surgery. Why then should we hesitate to acknowledge the work done by our dermatologist colleagues in surgery? The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) does not distinguish between medical and surgical specialties. The ABMS and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) respond to fluid changes or innovations which occur within specialties. We are a specialty with expertise in both medicine and surgery. In fact, it is the "medical" background (i.e. anatomy, function, and pathology) that may provide the knowledge to make groundbreaking discoveries and improvements in surgical dermatology.

We are physicians and surgeons; we are not proceduralists. A "surgeon" is one who specializes in surgery. "Surgery" is defined as "a branch of medicine concerned with the correction of physical defects, the repair of injuries, and the treatment of disease especially by operation." "Procedure" is defined as "a series of steps followed in a

regular order.” Is there really any doubt that facial reconstruction, tumescent liposuction, or full-face laser resurfacing would be most accurately categorized as “surgery?” Unfortunately, in this arena name is game. If we are hesitant to acknowledge our expertise in surgery, we should not fault other specialties, the media, the public, or the legislature for the same.

A large body of our dermatologic surgical repertoire includes oncologic surgery, reconstructive surgery, laser surgery, hair restoration surgery, and liposuction surgery. The public and the media’s perception of the physicians who are expert at these procedures is frequently a plastic (or perhaps oculoplastic or facial plastic) surgeon. Why then hesitate to call it what it is... dermatologic plastic surgery or dermatoplastic surgery? These terms are not new, and in fact, were first suggested almost twenty years ago by Drs. Larry Field and Richard Webster. Their intent was to level the playing field among plastic surgeons, facial plastic surgeons, oculoplastic surgeons, dermatoplastic surgeons. Clarity to the public was emphasized. The term was used by many surgical dermatologists but not fully embraced by our society. In the present day some seem to fear minimalizing the medical aspect of dermatology. Some may be reluctant to adopt the term because they do not perform oncologic and reconstructive surgery and fear that they will not be included under the umbrella term “dermatoplastic surgeon.” However, this need not be the case. Not all plastic surgeons perform midline forehead flaps, reconstruction requiring tissue expanders, or burn care, but they have a working knowledge of these procedures and can refer to another physician who does. Not all plastic surgeons perform laser skin resurfacing or endoscopic surgery but that does not stop them from having the title of plastic surgeons. Not all dermatoplastic surgeons need to be able to perform Mohs surgery or reconstructive surgery, but they should have an understanding of the procedures and refer appropriately. Not all dermatoplastic surgeons need to perform laser surgery, Botox or endovascular radiofrequency surgery if they practice other forms of dermatologic plastic surgery.

Because of the natural evolution of techniques and development of new innovations, many of the procedures practiced by our dermatoplastic colleagues were not included in their residency training. Many techniques have been learned from meetings, from seminars, or from visiting other dermatoplastic surgeons’ offices, but we have to be able to pass on the training to those dermatologists that follow.

The specialty of dermatology has changed since the first group of surgeons chose to specialize in skin disease. Our description of what we do should accurately reflect this change. Our specialty provides superior cure rates and cosmetic outcomes with Mohs micrographic surgery. Our specialty provides lower morbidity and mortality rates with tumescent liposuction. For our patients, for our practices and for the physicians and surgeons and their innovations that follow, we should insure preservation of our surgical practice. To that end, we should call it what it is... dermatologic plastic surgery.

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