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Stricter liposuction rules for docs

MOH introduces at least six new terms on top of existing rules set in 2008

By POON CHIAN HEE

THE Ministry of Health (MOH) has tightened rules on liposuction, an invasive cosmetic procedure in which a patient has fat deposits sucked out of his or her body in order to look slimmer.

Doctors, including specialists like plastic surgeons, who want to perform this procedure must now comply with at least six new licensing requirements.

The move follows the death of a property firm chief executive, Mr Franklin Hong, in December 2009. The 44-year-old died in Tan Tock Seng Hospital after a liposuction procedure at Raffles Clinic in Orchard Road.

It was reported in February last year that Dr Jim Wong, 34, a general practitioner (GP) and one of Raffles Clinic's partners, was helping in investigations.

Liposuction is a high-risk surgical procedure in which fat is drawn out through a tube attached to a suction device while the patient is under general anaesthesia or sedation. Several methods are available, such as ultrasound-assisted and laser-assisted liposuction.

The new rules, which kicked in last November, specify that a patient must wait at least two weeks between two consecutive liposuction sessions.

Every repeat procedure on the same patient must be performed in a surgical centre or hospital and be treated as a separate procedure.

The patient must also be given a seven-day "cooling-off" period every time he wants to go for liposuction. This is to give him time to reconsider his decision before undergoing the knife.

All staff involved in the liposuction procedure must also be trained in basic cardiac life support, and doctors in advanced cardiac life support. At least one registered nurse trained in sedation



Plastic surgeon Tan Ying Chien of The Sloane Clinic Plastic Surgery Centre says he expects more restrictions to be introduced for other invasive cosmetic procedures as more non-specialists offer such services. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

This means that a group of at least four doctors must come together to discuss each other's liposuction cases, including the complications encountered, to see if practices can be improved.

Doctors doing the peer reviews must be accredited by the Accreditation Committee of Liposuction (ACL) under MOH or must be authorised to do liposuction in surgical centres or hospitals.

The peer review sessions must be properly documented for the ministry's audit rounds.

An MOH spokesman told The Straits Times that the additional licensing terms are "part of its regular review to further enhance patient safety in relation to liposuction services".

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Liposuction used to be done exclusively by plastic surgeons. But from the 1990s, as technology improved, other doctors like GPs began offering it.

One of them, Dr Kevin Teh, medical director of Singapore Lips, Body & Face Centre, said the move will ensure that only the best doctors with sufficient resources to meet the requirements offer the service.

But he feels that some rules could be fine-tuned, such as the one on how repeat procedures must be carried out in a surgical centre or hospital. He said patients may ask for minor touch-ups but for them to undergo this in a surgical centre would drive up costs.

Dr David Loh, chairman of the Liposuction Peer Review Committee under the Society of Aesthetic Medicine (Singapore), is in favour of the new rules. The GP feels that peer reviews have helped him improve his liposuction techniques.

The Liposuction Peer Review Committee, comprised of GPs, was formed in 2005 and meets at least four times a year to review liposuction cases and discuss new techniques.

But plastic surgeon J.J. Chua, who runs a private practice in Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, feels that the ministry should review its policy on who can perform liposuction.

He said it must be performed only by specialists with extensive and proper training, because it may cause complications, including death, as underlying organs like the liver and spleen can be punctured.

Procedures should also be done within or near a hospital so that patients will have access to emergency help quickly, he added.

Key revisions for procedures

THE rules governing doctors who want to perform liposuction have been tightened by the Ministry of Health. The key revised licensing terms and conditions are that:

- There should be at least two weeks between any two liposuction sessions performed on a patient.
- All staff involved in the liposuction procedure must be trained and be up to date in basic cardiac life support. All doctors performing liposuction must be certified in Advanced Cardiac Life Support.
- Peer reviews of liposuction procedures, including discussion of complications that arise, must be done at least once every six months.
- The peer review must be done by at least four doctors who are either accredited by the Accreditation Committee of Liposuction or authorised to do liposuction in outpatient surgery centres or hospitals.
- Every repeat liposuction procedure on a patient must be performed in an outpatient surgery centre or hospital and treated as a separate procedure.
- The patient undergoing a repeat liposuction procedure must also be given a seven-day cooling-off period, as is the case with patients having the procedure done the first time.
- The cooling-off period gives the patient time to think about the decision to undergo the procedure, and is included in the two weeks that has to be given between two consecutive procedures (from the first point).
- There must be at least one registered nurse trained in sedation monitoring the recovery area.

SOURCE: MINISTRY OF HEALTH

Plastic surgeon Tan Ying Chien of The Sloane Clinic Plastic Surgery Centre said the additional rules would "definitely restrict our practice". But he noted they may be necessary for the patients' best interests.

Referring to doctors like GPs, he added: "I expect there will be more restrictions introduced for the other invasive cosmetic procedures such as eyelid surgery in the future, as more non-specialists are venturing into this area."

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