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With the recent death of a man after liposuction, **Tan Dawn Wei** and **Debby Kwong** talk to doctors in this controversial multimillion-dollar industry



Before & 2 hours later

PHOTO: SINGAPORE MEDICAL GROUP LTD

TAKINGS

Every year, thousands of women – and increasingly men – subject themselves to liposuction at a clinic or hospital here in a bid to attain an enviable, svelte figure.

This surgical procedure to remove fat through suction is a burgeoning multimillion-dollar industry, but not one without risks, as the recent death of property head honcho Franklin Heng has shown.

While details of what caused his death have not been revealed, it has nonetheless cast a pall on a controversial industry that has, in the last few years, been the subject of much heated debate that has split the medical fraternity and seen the Ministry of Health's (MCH) eventual intervention.

Once the exclusive domain of plastic surgeons, general practitioners (GPs) have been getting in on the act, lured by the good money to be made. Liposuction is part of a rapidly growing \$200-million-a-year aesthetic industry here.

Demand for such quick fixes has been on the rise, doctors reported, fuelled by the media, advancements in medical technology and aggressive marketing by clinics and liposuction equipment distributors.

While there are no statistics on how many liposuction procedures are done here each year, it is estimated that the number could easily be 5,000 or more.

MCH's Accreditation Committee on Liposuction has licensed 57 doctors to perform liposuction, out of 77 doctors who applied. Of those given the green light, 36 are GPs and 12 are plastic surgeons.

These doctors say liposuction accounts for between 15 and 20 per cent of their total business, which includes other cosmetic procedures. It is a competitive business, they contend. Prices have dropped since GPs began muscling in on the action.

A liposuction procedure can cost anything from \$2,000 to more than \$20,000, with GPs generally charging half the price of plastic surgeons. The competition is not just confined to Singapore. More cost-conscious Singaporeans are also choosing to get their nip and tuck in cheaper countries like Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea.

But there is insufficient awareness of the risks and complications of liposuction, and this in turn is driving people to try it, in the hope of finding an easy solution, said Dr Andrew Tay, consultant plastic surgeon at The Plastic Surgery Practice.

Liposuction is not to be taken lightly, said liposuction doctors. The Sunday Times spoke to:

"Liposuction might seem to be an easy procedure, but the reality is that complications can arise as a direct result of the procedure. Also, bear in mind there are risks related to the anaesthesia given too," said Dr Ivor Lim, chairman of the Chapter of Plastic Surgeons at the College of Surgeons.

Indeed, it emerged in a Kuala Lumpur abdominal fat post-mortem extensive into

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leaked from 11 puncture wounds left by the liposuction tubes. The autopsy ruled that she died from acute lidocaine intoxication. Lidocaine is a nerve blocker which suppresses pain during liposuction.

New procedures

But not everyone is overly concerned, especially since new-generation methods like ultrasound-assisted and water-jet liposuction have promised less invasive surgeries that are supposedly safer and come with less downtime.

Dr Kevin Teh, medical director at the Singapore Lipos, Body and Face Centre, said his patients typically go back to work or do household chores within a day or two.

"I even had a young man do his lipo in the morning and by lunch-time was back on his computer working away," said the GP. He does treatments at an accredited day surgery centre where he can remove more than one litre of fat.

One of his happy clients is Ms Jelyn Yew, 25, who saved up for a liposuction on her upper and lower abdomen which she did recently. The customer service officer spent \$2,900 – a steal compared to the \$5,000 she would have had to pay a plastic surgeon, she said.

The 1.58m-tall woman, who weighs 50.4kg, went through a four-hour surgery and even went to a late lunch later.

She took painkillers twice a day, wore a compression garment for a month and thinks nothing of the small incisions – less than 1cm at her belly button, on her hips and groin – made for the procedure. "Liposuction is a safe procedure," she said.

By 2008, in response to growing concern and pressure from plastic surgeons that GPs and specialists in other fields may not be equipped to handle the procedure, MCH set new guidelines which made it mandatory for doctors who want to perform liposuction to get accreditation from a doctor committee.

They also had to satisfy other regulations such as having at least one year of surgical training following their housemanship, plus training in the procedure.

Those who choose to do treatments in a clinic must also have medical staff to monitor sedated patients, and can remove only up to one litre of fat per session. Anything more must be done at a hospital or a surgery centre.

While the all cases also have to be kept and complications or complaints reported.

The Singapore Medical Association says it has received only three complaints related to aesthetics treatment since then, none of which was about liposuction.

The Singapore Medical Council received four complaints related to liposuction from 2007 to last year. It got 40 aesthetic-related complaints in the same time – a relatively small

A day before news broke about Singapore's first liposuction-related death, Dr Siew Tuck Wah was getting his fats sucked from his abdomen by his colleague, plastic surgeon Tan Ying Chien.

It was all in a day's work for both men. All physicians at The Sloane Clinic, where they both work, have to undergo all treatments on offer at the aesthetic clinic so they have "a patient's perspective", said Dr Siew, a general practitioner who performs non-invasive and minimally invasive procedures such as injecting Botox and fillers.

"This ensures that our treatment protocols are fine-tuned to increase a patient's efficacy and comfort."

Since joining the aesthetic chain

[special report: liposuction]

COSTS AND TYPES

Liposuction is a procedure where a body is sculpted by removing excess fat. The areas targeted include the arms, abdomen, buttocks, thighs and calves.

Cost starts at \$2,000 when it is done by general practitioners and \$4,000 when it is done by plastic surgeons.

Patients also have to pay for pre-operative tests, post-operative compression garments, antibiotics and other drugs. The use of operating theatre facilities and anaesthetists' fees add \$3,500 on average.

There are at least four types of liposuction available.

■ **Traditional suction-assisted liposuction**
This involves a doctor using a cannula to

poke the fat cells until the fat breaks into little modules that can then be sucked out.

■ **Vaser liposuction**

This is currently the most popular form of liposuction here. The same ultrasound used to scan babies is used to dissolve the fat before sucking it out.

■ **Smartlipo**

This is a form of laser-assisted liposuction which melts the fat. It is normally used for smaller areas like the chin.

■ **Waterjet liposuction**

High water pressure is used to dislodge fat cells before they are sucked out. The water spray delivers anaesthesia directly to the targeted area.



Plastic surgeon Tan Ying Chien (left) performed liposuction on aesthetic doctor Siew Tuck Wah earlier this month. They both work at The Sloane Clinic.

ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

Doe got fats removed too

"Liposuction – any form – is purely a sculpting tool. And it is only best for small areas like love handles."

The invasive surgery involves sucking solid fats out of the body, mostly from the abdomen, hips, buttocks and arms. Usually performed under general anaesthesia, it typically takes a few hours and recovery follows in one to three weeks.

The tummy is the most popular spot for a liposuction among Singaporeans. But not all complications associated with the fat removal, including bleeding, infection, prolonged swelling and bruising, contour irregularities, and even perforation of the abdomen or chest wall resulting in injury to internal organs.

All eyes will be on the outcome of the findings of Mr Heng's case and the industry is keeping a close watch before taking action.

Dr Vincent Yeow, president of the Singapore Association of Plastic Surgeons, which lobbied for restrictions on who could perform liposuction in 2008, said: "It's unfortunate there has been a death. The industry per se is a contentious one. While there are many points of opinion, this is not an appropriate time until details are clearer as to

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Since joining the aesthetic chain

'More painful than giving birth'

When news broke that a man had died following a liposuction

For the rest of the week, she had to get her family members to help

said no, for fear of being unable to cope with the pain again.

last year, he has undergone a facelift, Botox for wrinkles and Smoothbeam laser to control his acne.

His liposuction – his first – sounded like something of a non-event: He had 300ml of fat taken out in surgery that took two hours using Vaser ultrasound-assisted liposuction.

By afternoon, he was back at work, with some mild aches on his abdomen.

Exercise and dieting have not helped get rid of his love handles. The single doctor, who is in his mid-30s, works out at the gym up to four times a week; running and doing weight training for up to two hours each time.

"I think that because I am a phy-

sician, I am more cautious than most people as I am fully aware of all the possible risks," he said.

"Every surgical procedure will carry with it some amount of risk, but this can be minimised by choosing a qualified surgeon who is highly skilled yet takes into account patient safety and comfort."

Dr Tan, whose liposuction fees start from \$4,500, sees an average of seven cases a week.

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