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That Quest to Enhance Beauty Can Leave Scars

By SANA SIWOLOP

Like so many others, Katie O'Hara, a nursing student at Sacramento State University in California, was looking to enhance her appearance when she visited a day spa two years ago. In her case, she wanted to remove a chain of flowers that she had tattooed around her left ankle. (She never really liked it, she explained.)

She said she was considering laser treatment by a physician but that an aesthetician at the spa persuaded her to try a chemical peel, arguing that it was a superior method and less expensive. Ms. O'Hara, who is 27, said she never went past the first stage of treatment: less than two days after the aesthetician applied the peel to a small portion of the tattoo, her foot began to swell, she was unable to walk and, within a week, she was in a hospital emergency room. Had she waited much longer to seek medical attention, she said the attending physician told her, her foot probably would have had to be amputated.

Ms. O'Hara's story is startling but not entirely unusual. Doctors and health officials around the country say that a growing number of medically complex cosmetic procedures are being offered in beauty salons, day spas and some nurses' clinics. And sometimes, they say, the procedures are performed by unlicensed or unqualified people, increasing the chances of something going wrong.

The procedures include some that many consumers assume are relatively simple — Botox and collagen injections for wrinkles, for example. Others are more complicated — like laser treatments, chemical peels and microdermabrasion, an intense spray of tiny crystals. Experts say many procedures are being falsely advertised — often at seemingly low prices — to consumers who are assured that a licensed physician will be supervising the procedure, when, in fact, that may not always be the case.

"This is a pervasive problem," said Dr. Roy G. Geronemus, a clinical professor of dermatology at the New York University School of Medicine. He said he knew of one Manhattan day spa whose medical director is based in the Hamptons and not often on the premises.

In Florida, Enrique T. Torres, chief investigator for the Florida Department of Health, estimates that half the 74 arrests that his department has made since 1998 for people operating without medical licenses have been for those offering fairly complicated cosmetic procedures, including plastic surgery. But he said that was the tip of the iceberg. The arrests, he said, are "absolutely nothing compared to what is out here in the state," because too many consumers "are looking for a cheap way out."

State officials elsewhere agree. Joseph Tepedino, a supervising investigator for the Office of Professional Discipline of the New York State Department of Education, says his office is increasingly asked to investigate complaints about medically unqualified individuals and businesses promoting cosmetic procedures, especially on the Internet.

The Medical Board of California has been working for the last year with the California Society of Dermatology and Dermatologic Surgery, a professional group, to track cosmetic procedures that are supposedly performed or supervised by licensed physicians but are not. Jerome R. Potozkin, the society's president, said one concern was the growing number of nurses who supposedly partner with physicians to set up cosmetic practices, at least on paper. Sometimes, he said, the nurse happens to be married to the doctor in question.

By law, nurses in California, as in many other states, are not permitted to set up a medical practice without the direct supervision of a physician. But Dr. Potozkin said he knew of at least one nurse-owned company, which he declined to identify, that was trying to do just that, mostly by sponsoring workshops for other nurses around the country. The goal of the workshops, he said, was to lure other nurses into the business. He said they are told that they need only attend a one- or two-day course before they, too, can set up lucrative practice offering cosmetic procedures like Botox injections, laser skin rejuvenation and sclerotherapy, which uses an injected solution to reduce the size of spider veins or small varicose veins.

"These are things that take years to learn, not just a day or so," Dr. Potozkin said.

Physicians maintain that even seemingly quick Botox injections — which the Food and Drug Administration approved three months ago for minimizing frown lines — can cause complications like eyelid or brow droop, double vision and paralysis of other muscles in the face if they are performed incorrectly.

"Botox should not be taken lightly," said Dr. Harold J. Brody, a clinical professor of dermatology at the Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta. "You have to know facial anatomy, which is very complex and not something that a beautician, cosmetologist or even a registered nurse is trained to do."

Medical experts say they are also concerned about laser procedures that are used to remove unwanted body hair, birthmarks and scars, as well as to smooth out lines and wrinkles. Improperly administered, lasers can cause burns, splotching or irreversible pigmentation changes and scarring. (People with tans, for instance, are not good candidates for laser hair removal.) Consumers who are treated by nonphysicians may not be properly diagnosed for serious conditions, including skin cancers, experts say.

The American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, a professional group based in Rolling Meadows, Ill., a Chicago suburb, said 45 percent of its 2,500 members surveyed recently reported an increase in the number of patients they have treated over the last year for complications from cosmetic procedures, including laser treatments.

Mr. Tepedino, the New York State investigator, estimated that over the last year alone, his office received about three dozen complaints about laser hair removal procedures in New York City, with most of the complaints directed toward beauty salons and spas. Previously, he said, his office typically received few if any complaints in a year.

Seventeen states currently have no laws specifying who can administer laser-based cosmetic procedures. Fourteen states, including New Jersey, now require that lasers be used only by licensed physicians, while nine states, as well as the District of Columbia, allow physicians to delegate laser use if a licensed doctor is on site. The remaining 10 states, including New York and Connecticut, let doctors delegate laser use at their discretion.

According to the dermatologic trade group, a physician may delegate certain cosmetic procedures, including laser hair removal and microdermabrasion, to certified or licensed office personnel like registered nurses, physician assistants and nurse practitioners. But the supervising physician must be present when the procedure is being done. The society says it does not recommend that physicians delegate any procedure that involves injecting a substance into the skin, like Botox or collagen.

Consumers can obtain more information at the society's Web site, www.aboutskinsurgery.com.

The Spa Association, a trade group based in Fort Collins, Colo., which has more than 1,800 members that include spas and wellness centers, says it is also opposed to aestheticians and spa employees providing consumers with Botox and collagen injections, as well as laser procedures that require anesthesia. Melinda M. Minton, the association's executive director, said that while all 50 states and the District of Columbia require aestheticians to be licensed, each state has different educational requirements, ranging from 300 to 1,500 hours of combined classroom and practical training.

But schools for aestheticians also vary in the amount of medical training that they require, Ms. Minton said. Her group, whose Web site is www.thespaassociation.com, advises consumers to seek out paramedical aestheticians, who are trained to assist physicians and who typically receive more training in areas like emergency procedures and hygiene.

Health officials advise consumers considering cosmetic procedures to check first with their state agency that oversees cosmetology, to see if particular individuals or businesses are licensed, as well as whether any complaints have been lodged against them. But they also caution consumers to steer clear of day spas or salons that offer procedures at seemingly cut-rate prices — for example, Botox injections in urban areas that are priced at \$250 or less, sharply undercutting the standard fee of \$350 to \$500. In those cases, the low price may mean that the Botox is watered down, so its effects may not last as long or may even raise the risk of complications.

The dermatologic society recommends that consumers ask about possible side effects of medically complex cosmetic procedures and about the number of times a procedure has been performed by a particular person. For laser-based procedures, the society says consumers should ask whether the laser system is appropriate for their skin type, hair color, complexion and body area.

MS. O'Hara, the nursing student who was trying to have a tattoo removed, can now recall some red flags when she was having her chemical peel. Before her procedure, she said, her aesthetician asked her not to scream, to prevent anyone in the waiting room from becoming disturbed. To remove the tattoo, she said, the aesthetician used both a chemical peel and a pumice stone and "scrubbed it until it was raw," and hurt. She said the attending physician at the emergency room suspected that her infection resulted from unsterile conditions.

Ms. O'Hara eventually sued the aesthetician for negligence, though, she said, she settled her case out of court last fall for \$2,000. Even so, she still bears a scar at the site of the tattoo removal, something that should not have occurred. Ms. O'Hara says she is now seeing a physician to have the rest of the tattoo removed with a laser; so far, she said, that procedure has not produced any scarring.

Rick Lopes, a spokesman for the California State Bureau of Barbering and Cosmetology, finds such cases worrisome. "Beauty should not hurt," he said. "If something is painful, then either that person is performing something incorrectly, or they're going beyond the scope of what they're licensed to do."