

# TELL ALL (MOST)

What makes some women deny they've ever gone near a scalpel or needle—and others talk about their latest procedures with complete abandon? **By Joan Kron**

**J**ulie\*, a 33-year-old publishing executive, has something to confess. She has had cosmetic surgery and believes that coming clean is the right thing to do. "It's not fair to hold others to some impossible standard," she says. In her stovepipe jeans, she appears to be the least likely candidate for liposuction. But Julie went the surgical route three years ago to get rid of the saddlebags on her thighs, bulges that regularly forced her to buy pants a size too large. "I was a skeleton everywhere else, but liposuction enabled me to fit into size 4 pants off the rack." Now, she says, if anyone compliments her on her body, she makes a point of telling them the truth:

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"Otherwise it's false advertising, like carrying a fake Kelly bag."

A few of Julie's friends lectured her about changing her body, but for the most part, people were incredulous—or curious: "You've had lipo? Does it hurt?" Julie was also surprised at the revelations from other women when she offered her story. "They end up telling me their plastic-surgery secrets, saying, 'I got implants,' or 'I couldn't wait for a nose job,'" she says. "I feel like a beauty psychotherapist."

On the other hand, Vicky\* is as secretive about her cosmetic work as a CIA operative. A mover in Washington

\*This name has been changed.



**Model Susan Holmes in a photograph by Steven Meisel**

political circles, she feels that calling attention to one's surgery just invites scrutiny and gossip. "The moment you tell someone you had a face-lift, the automatic assumption is that you must have been old and wrinkly," she explains. "The whole point of getting a face-lift, in my opinion, is to *not* be perceived as old and wrinkly. So if you tell anyone you had one, you've undermined at least 18 grand worth of surgery!"

Clearly, women are conflicted about divulging information about their cosmetic surgery—how much should they

reveal, and to whom? A survey by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reported that 73 percent of women would "not be embarrassed if others knew they had [had] cosmetic surgery." But is that really true? Among both high-profile celebrities and low-profile women, there are some signs that patients are shifting away from total secrecy. Still, even though someone like Julie has confessed all to friends and says that she feels very open about her cosmetic work, she chose to have her name changed for this article.

STEVEN MEISEL/ART + COMMERCE



One popular way of dealing with the subject of whether one has had cosmetic work is to say, "I'm not against it—for other people." Some just flat-out denounce it. Then there are false excuses people use to get around the truth: They say they fell off a horse, had an allergic reaction to medicine, walked into a wall. "I had a patient who stepped on a rake—for real—and now I can use that excuse the next time I need one," says Anne Taylor, director of cosmetic surgery at Ohio State University Medical Center.

**S**ome women are in such denial that they even lie to their doctors. One prominent socialite came to Scott Wells, a New York City plastic surgeon, for a face-lift. "She admitted to me that she had had her eyes done, but she denied having had any lifting, even though she had face-lift scars that were visible when I looked closely," he says. "I didn't call her on it and just made my scar in the same area. I don't confront patients if they aren't telling the truth, unless there is a medical reason."

The degree to which women will talk about any cosmetic work seems to depend on the type of procedure. According to an informal survey of plastic surgeons and patients, women who have had tummy tucks or breast augmentation/reduction practically have to be restrained from showing off the results. People seem conflicted about discussing cheek implants, face-lifts, or lip augmentation (even if it's obvious). And women who have had vaginal labiaplasty surgery or a procedure to correct bad cosmetic surgery are so secretive, according to Charlie Sheridan, the director of Marina Plastic Surgery in Marina Del Ray, California, that "they often do not even want to list an emergency contact number on our questionnaires."

The women who struggle the most with this decision are probably celebrities. After all, there are entire websites devoted to guessing how much surgery various stars have had. But despite the public's curiosity, this is not a right-to-know issue, says Eva Ritvo, a

psychiatrist in Miami and coauthor of *The Beauty Prescription* (McGraw-Hill). Ritvo thinks that the pressure on great beauties to look good and the unrelenting efforts by the media to uncover any alterations they may have had feels like a complete invasion of privacy. "So they set boundaries," she says. "Withholding information is sometimes necessary."

Even those who are famous for seeking the truth have their moments of secrecy. In her autobiography, *Audition* (Vintage), Barbara Walters shares almost every embarrassing feeling and event in her life—including resentment toward her mentally challenged sister, a clandestine affair with a married senator, and a liaison with a sketchy lawyer in order to keep her father out of jail. But she never mentions, as *The New York Times* put it delicately, "the youth-preserving surgery of anyone other than [her friend] Roy Cohn," completely ignoring speculation

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about how Walters, who is approaching 80, manages to look closer to 50.

Jacque Lynn Foltyn, a sociologist in San Diego, explains that many people believe beauty should be natural; therefore, beauty bestowed by a plastic surgeon is inauthentic and valued less. "If it's revealed that a famous beauty has had her nose done or been injected with Botox, it undermines the mystique," she says. "It's like doping in sports. Having surgery is somehow cheating. It becomes a spoiled identity—there's a stigma."

Oscar-nominated actress Virginia Madsen is trying to counteract that stigma while serving as a spokeswoman for Botox. "All the actors I know are using it," says the 48-year-old costar of *Sideways*. "Many have told me, 'I'm so glad you're talking about this.'"

Madsen admits that she wouldn't be speaking up if she hadn't revealed her Botox use to a reporter a few years ago. "The interviewer was criticizing an actress I really love," recalls Madsen, "and said to me, 'You don't use that Botox stuff like she does.' And I said, 'Yes, I do.' And then the interviewer said, 'But your forehead moves.'"

Madsen seems a long way from a face-lift, but if she has one, will she admit it? "I probably will," says the actress. "But I'm not there yet. There was a time when we didn't talk about coloring our hair, and no one is that blonde—not that I'm equating a medical procedure with hair color, but times have changed. Women and men are talking more openly than ever before. That's a good trend."

While secrecy is still important to some women, Foltyn says that others believe that telling is "the sisterly thing to do." Women sharing information with one another is a necessary step for getting the best care, according to Ritvo. "You want to talk with close friends to see if they're happy," she says. "Did they like their doctor, say, or their choice of implant? Talking is research." However, while more people are doing so as a bonding experience, according to Patricia Wexler, associate clinical professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai College of Medicine, they only speak openly when they like the results. "People are sharing information when the work is good and natural, but not when they are unhappy with the work," she says.

Tina S. Alster, a professor of dermatology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., believes that the decision to talk or not is truly generational. "Young things say, 'Sure, I get Botox.' It's the baby boomers who hold their cards so close to their chests." Foltyn takes it one step further. "Younger people view their bodies as changeable, mutable," she says. "They get tattoos, experiment with identity, choose avatars to represent themselves online. It's hard to tell what's real and what's been Photoshopped. Maybe we're all works in progress."

Peggy Siegal, a powerful New York publicist, is thrilled to consider herself a work in (continued on page 177)



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progress. "I thumb my nose at nature," she says—a nose she jokingly calls "my only original body part." She is delighted when she hears insiders whispering about her, "Do you know how old she is?" Siegal is 62, with the face and body of someone at least 20 years younger. The highlight of her sixtieth-birthday party was the booklet she handed out to her guests that listed the names and phone numbers of the plastic surgeon who did her eyes at age 40 and her face at 59, the podiatrist who shortened her toes, the orthodontist who straightened her teeth, the dentist who veneered them, the diet doctor who taught her how to eat, and the dermatologist who performs her liposuction and administers her Botox shots. The booklet is now in its tenth printing.

"At 60, you can put a gun to your head or you can celebrate the fact that you're alive and healthy and have friends," says Siegal. "So I decided to tell everyone it's OK to be this age. They were shocked that anyone would admit it, but also relieved someone had the guts to confess." It was easier for Siegal than for others, because, she says with pride, "I knew I didn't look 60."

Divulging her prescription for looking good may have been easier for Siegal because she has never seen herself as beautiful. Her quest for physical perfection has its roots in a painful childhood: "My mother—a great beauty—had my brother's portrait painted and hung it with a light over it. It was the first thing I saw every day when I came home from school. I would ask her, 'When are you going to have my portrait painted?' 'When you get pretty' was her answer." (Not surprisingly, her mother's recollection differs. "I would never say that," says Annette Siegal. "She was always attractive; her father adored her.")

Looking uncharacteristically vulnerable for a moment, Siegal continues, "You can be destroyed by that story or rise above it." Her many procedures, she says, were a constructive way to help nature along. "It all made me feel better about myself," she says. Now Siegal enjoys being a role model. "And if someone tells me, 'You have great skin,' I say, 'You can buy that skin, and here's the number.'" ♦