

## Old head injuries linked to Alzheimer's

World War II veterans who had serious head injuries decades ago now have a higher risk of Alzheimer's disease, a finding that suggests serious blows to the head may somehow cause long-term brain damage, researchers said Monday. The more severe the head injury the greater the risk of developing Alzheimer's, the teams at the National Institute on Aging (NIA) and Duke University found. The researchers say they do not know just what, biologically, is happening over the 50 years between injury and disease in the men, but they say the study shows that Alzheimer's is a long-term, progressive condition. They used Veterans Affairs Department medical records to track down 548 veterans who had suffered head injuries and 1,228 veterans who had not. "We found that head injury in early adult life was associated with increased risk of Alzheimer's disease and dementia in late life, and that this risk increased with the severity of the injury," the researchers write in today's issue of the journal *Neurology*.



**A plague:** Peter Spurgin, a locust control officer in New South Wales, Australia, collects samples in April.

### Green Muscle battles locust swarms

Biologists say they have finally come up with a sure, safe way to kill one of humanity's most frightening scourges: the swarming desert locust. Developed by a team of international scientists and marketed as Green Muscle, the otherwise harmless, naturally occurring fungus has proved successful in extensive field testing in Niger, where the insects have devastated farmland areas four times since 1986, according to a report presented at a World Bank scientific conference that opened Monday in Washington, D.C. In recent months, unusually large numbers of locusts and other grasshoppers have invaded parts of Africa, Argentina, Australia, China, Spain, Russia and the USA. "This new product is environmentally sound. It kills grasshoppers and locusts and nothing else," says Jürgen Lange, a German entomologist who helped develop Green Muscle from the fungus *Metarhizium anisopliae*.

### Cell abnormalities develop early

Most human embryos possess genetic defects just days into their development, a finding that researchers say may explain why many pregnancies fail shortly after conception. Researchers who studied all 46 chromosomes in 3-day-old embryos say they believe a new DNA test can improve success rates for infertile patients by allowing doctors to choose embryos with normal sets of chromosomes for implantation into a mother's womb. The technology also could decrease the number of multiple births to women undergoing in vitro fertilization, because fewer embryos would have to be inserted into the womb to lead to a successful pregnancy, says lead investigator Dagan Weir of University College in London. He reported his findings this week at the American Society for Reproductive Medicine's annual meeting in San Diego.

### Cancer worries lower than expected

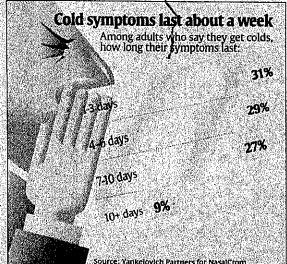
Most women at high risk for breast and ovarian cancer are not worried about getting cancer, and their mental health is excellent, a study suggests. The findings could help explain why few women are taking genetic tests to determine their cancer risk, says University of Pennsylvania psychologist James Coyne. His study in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* reports on 454 women who are in remission from breast or ovarian cancer or whose relatives had those diseases. Overall, the women scored very low on tests of anxiety and depression, Coyne says. Scientists have assumed that few women are opting for the new genetic tests because they fear the results. Instead, Coyne says, living with a familial risk of cancer "may have instilled psychological resources and resilience."

### Superkids? Or a generation of un-humans?

Technology's effects on children have probably been both good and bad, but now it's time to move forward and broaden parents' and programmers' understanding of the role of technology in children's lives, says a group of experts from both sides of the debate. A collaboration of the American Psychological Association and the National Communication Association, the group Monday dispelled all current findings on topics such as violent video games, online behaviors, cognitive patterns and developmental issues. The group pledged to work toward strong research on technology and kids in the next three years. The group expects to further examine at what ages particular technologies are beneficial, harmful and neutral.

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### USA TODAY Snapshots®



# Online, operations raise eyebrows

## Many plastic surgeons want to nip budding bidding on the Web

By Olivia Barker  
USA TODAY

Going, going, gone... too far? While online auctions are nothing new when it comes to peddling airline tickets and even college tuition, some Web sites now are letting consumers bid for cosmetic surgery and other non-emergency medical procedures.

And not surprisingly, the addition of noses and breasts to the list of goods and services offered in cyberspace has caused a cleavage of sorts in the medical community.

The sites' founders say their systems promote good value, not cheap deals, by empowering patients with a variety of information including doctors' histories, education and credentials, as well as their costs.

"Because this is elective surgery, the question is, what's it worth to me?" says Roger Friedman, a plastic surgeon and board member of Bethesda, Md.-based CosmeticMDSelect.com, one of the bidding sites. "This is something, excuse the expression, you can shop."

And because insurance doesn't figure into the equation, price is necessarily a factor, he says. "I don't think people can deny that."

Critics contend that whenever price pushes its way into the examining room and the term "patient" morphs into "health care consumer," as well as "doctor" into "provider," something as sacred as the Hippocratic oath goes under the knife.

"The concept is just scary," says Michael McGuire, a Santa Monica plastic surgeon who is past president of the California Society of Plastic Surgeons. If someone has to go to a Web site to find a surgeon, "you have the least sophisticated patients in search of the most desperate or least qualified physicians, so it's a potential disaster waiting to happen."

The sites work in various ways. At CosmeticMDSelect, formerly CosmeticMDbid, potential patients submit a request that includes what kind of surgery they want, where and when they want it, and what they want to pay for it. Interested physicians respond with their own packages, presenting their credentials and questions, and each patient picks one.

Friedman says prices aren't meant to be negotiable, hence the company's name change. During a free consultation, doctor and patient iron out the details.

Friedman says the site educates people on the relative cost of a procedure in different geographic areas. "This is available to anybody, anywhere," he says, for people who think, "Shoot, I'll hop on the train and go down to Washington and have my surgery."

At MedicineOnline.com, based in Huntington Beach, Calif., patients don't submit prices with their profiles. Instead, after requests are made, doctors have 72 hours to review them and post their credentials and costs. Patients have seven days to choose. The auction, dubbed "dynamic" and "interactive" on the site, is ostensibly anonymous, though MedicineOnline acknowledges that doctors could masquerade as patients and log on to check what their competitors are charging.

"In plastics, the norm is, if you're interested in a tummy tuck, you go in, get a sales pitch and then find out what the price is," says David Puffer, vice president for business development at Medicine Online. "That really frustrates consumers."

### Changing the process

By inventing the process, Medicine Online frees users from taking a day off from work, scouring the Yellow Pages and pounding the pavement. Puffer says, "We have consumers say, 'You know how much time this saves me?'"

But Buchanan was tired of people telling her she looked tired. "I'd get comments," says the medical clinic account manager from Westminster, Calif. "Are you sleeping well? Do you feel OK?" She had thought about eyelid surgery, but before logging on to Medicine Online, "someone could have told me it cost \$10,000. I wouldn't know."

Five surgeons bid five fees, ranging from \$1,500 to \$3,000. After consulting her primary care doctor, Buchanan chose a \$1,650 bid.

"I look at it as a really easy way of shopping," says Buchanan, 44. "It's like window shopping, but in my house, with my monitor as the window." Buchanan says she has referred "I don't know how many ladies" to Medicine Online, as well as a few men.

James Wells, treasurer for the American Society of Plastic Surgeons president-elect, calls the method "a backdoor way to get into an surgery." Normally, "people come in, and they literally hate themselves, not only physically, but also emotionally. My concern is the Internet voids that because it's primarily concerned with the dollar, and it's hard to be rigorous about checking credentials. (Most online patients do meet their potential surgeons before making a commitment.)"

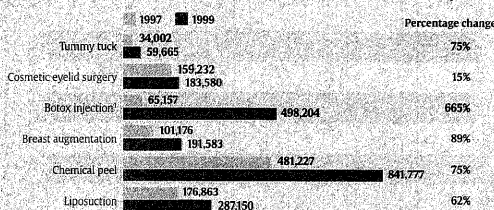
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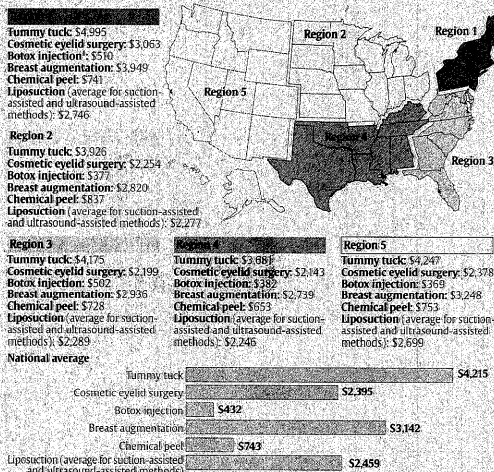
**The eyes have it:** Dawn Buchanan found a surgeon through Medicine Online. "It's like window shopping, but in my house."

### Plastic surgery boosted by botox

Number of procedures performed by surgeons certified by the American Board of Medical Specialties



### Average physician or surgeon costs in 1999



Note: Figures represent physician or surgeon fees only. They do not include costs for the surgical facility, anesthesia, medical fees, postoperative care, or other services. Fees are for the procedure only and do not include the cost of the procedure. Source: American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery

## Experts help you save face

How do you go about finding a qualified plastic surgeon? Consulting a primary care physician is a good place to start, experts say. "But I've seen people who were fooled by relying on that alone," says Michael McGuire, past president of the California Society of Plastic Surgeons. "Buyer beware — it's almost a carnival atmosphere out there right now."

Here are some tips on avoiding disappointment. If not death:

- Make sure the doctor is certified with the American Board of Plastic Surgery, the only board in the field that's part of the American Board of Medical Specialties. Public libraries have the *Directory of Medical Specialists*, which lists every physician who is certified by the ABMS (and therefore the ABPS).

Find out where the doctor is on hospital staff and whether he or she has privileges at those hospitals.

Hospitals have peer-review mechanisms to determine who is qualified to do particular procedures.

- Ask the doctor whether he or she is affiliated with a university program. Teaching is not essential, McGuire says, but it's another criterion of quality. "It's a bonus point."

Investigate whether the hospital or surgery clinic is accredited; any one of the several organizations that handle accreditation is acceptable.

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Board of Medical Specialists. Still, he acknowledges that "somehow" a psychiatrist posing as a plastic surgeon slipped in.

"He said he did breast augmentation, so he was easy to spot," Puffer says. "We haven't really had more than about one misrepresentation."

But some see one as too many. "This is like that cartoon from the New Yorker. On the Internet, no one knows if you're a dog at the other end," says Mark Jewell, a Eugene, Ore.-based plastic surgeon with the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. "It's really difficult to verify competency or quality or credentials simply by looking at a list."

In a statement released in December, the ASAPS formally flagged the possible dangers of online surgical auctions, making it the first major organization to do so.

Beginning in January, employees of companies that pay to join WebHealth.com Requests are can negotiate online for "standard," non-emergency services, from a gynecological checkup to corrective eye surgery. On QuickBuy, another part of the site, the order is reversed: Providers post their flat fees for such services, and consumers hunt and pick.

WebHealth's president, Brent Layton, a former insurance regulator, says that in time, the Marietta, Ga.-based company might "evolve to more elaborate things," like purchasing liposuction online.

But, Jewell cautions, "for every person who comes in for cosmetic surgery, there's no one standard face-lift, no one standard breast augmentation, no one standard liposuction." He adds that because somebody wants liposuction doesn't mean they're a candidate for it. I mean, you can't hold your thigh up to the monitor. It requires a one-on-one consultation with a plastic surgeon. So flying halfway across the country for it (sight unseen) — what a waste.

### Fueled by demand

Still, most critics concede it was only a matter of time before plastic surgery and the virtual auction room joined scalps with gavel. The skyrocketing demand for cosmetic surgery across the nation coupled with a rise in the number of cosmetic specialists, has made plastic surgery a highly competitive field, experts say.

So from billboards to financing schemes to raffles to online bids, cosmetic surgeons are forced to hawk their flesh-and-blood services like, well, plastic commodities.

"We think of it like getting your nails done or going to the spa. Instead of a vacation or a new car or new clothes, we get surgery," says Los Angeles plastic surgeon Brian Kinney, American Society of Plastic Surgeons spokesman.

From 1997 to 1999, the number of breast augmentations performed across the nation jumped 89%, while the number of people having liposuction increased 62%, according to the ASAPS. "We've almost become victims of our own success," Kinney says. "We've become so good at it that we almost don't take it as seriously anymore."