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The Right Type Of Inflation: Confidence in cosmetic surgery returns as the economy regains its shape, but does the sector need scrubbing up? By Tingy Simoes

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Despite a recent worldwide crisis which saw over 300,000 women fitted with defective implants, consumer confidence in cosmetic surgery seems barely shaken with UK figures this year showing a robust upwards curve in demand for all procedures, including breast augmentation.

Not just the newly-svelte public (liposuction alone is up by a whopping 41%, reports the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons) appears to have regained trust in the sector; the business world as well is awash with new product ranges, medical devices, magazines, trade expos and financial ventures in the aesthetic treatments arena.



British implant manufacturer Nagor, which alongside its sister brand Eurosilicone (based in France) also reports skyrocketing demand around the world, has just seen its parent company receive a cash injection

of \$60M from investors to fund its continued expansion. A new trade show bringing together the historically disparate worlds of non-surgical treatments, cosmetic and reconstructive surgery launched last September in London, and by the first day had sold out over 100% of the following year's stand space. It seems Britain may yet emerge as an entirely new and different breed of 'Silicone Valley' powerhouse.

But all is not well on planet Harley Street. A relentless media fascination and demand for all things nip and tuck also represents a double-edged scalpel. The sector is growing at a fast-paced rate that statutory regulation doesn't seem

willing or able to keep up with. In the wake of the PIP implant scandal, the Government finally appeared to have accepted the billion pound cosmetic surgery behemoth was not the quaint cottage industry it had previously thought: the niche,

exclusive domain of the rich and vain. It had been tens of thousand everyday mums, daughters and professionals who were affected by the implant crisis – as far from the glamour model and eccentric Hollywood actor moulds as could be imagined.

Yet after a thorough Governmental review of the sector involving some of the most vociferous stakeholders; resulting in a number of austere recommendations to promote patient safety such as controlling advertising and making facial injectables prescription-only; regulation once again fell at the last hurdle. Very few immediate, compulsory measures were announced, and the reputable associations, individual clinicians, hospital groups and businesses that had campaigned for change retired to their corners grumbling – resigned, cynical or furious, depending on their inclination. Other, less-conscientious strata of the sector one can only posit were overjoyed: the lack of true controls did mean, as one surgeon put it “it's business as usual – anyone can roll up and have a stab.”

More frustratingly, this had not been the first Government review into the aesthetics arena, nor had PIP been the first implant scandal. Just a few years ago, a panel of experts had made over 25 similar recommendations to the Chief Medical Officer; very few of which were later actioned. In fact some say we went backwards and now have less safeguards in place – for example the 2005 review called for stricter controls in the use of cosmetic lasers (such as for skin resurfacing and hair removal) and lasers for aesthetic use have actually since been entirely deregulated. This means more or less anyone can set up a practice offering this type of treatment, with no requirement to register with the Care Quality Commission – the body which oversees healthcare facilities.

The shape of the private sector itself is changing as it becomes more crowded, with the Internet becoming further solidified as the main source of information for the public when choosing a provider. The proliferation of online directories and review sites is virtually unstoppable,

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and only time will tell which of the many 'TripAdvisor'-style platforms springing up are here to stay. Surgeons seemed less prepared to deal with the onslaught as the focus of their training had to do more with tubed pedicles than YouTube, and tackling ptosis rather than Twitter. Promisingly, the new generation seems better equipped to deal with the challenges of modern private practice, and educational events such as the recent national conference for Aspiring Surgeons hosted by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh alongside the University of Bristol saw medical students from all around the UK explore subjects such as the role of social media in patient safety.

The cosmetic surgery sector; which

until just a decade ago could be seen as still embryonic when compared to the explosion of sensationalism it is seen as today; is definitely here to stay. But a stratospheric increase in aggressive marketing and cut-price deals is also leaving the public more vulnerable – especially when, despite a perceived acceptance of cosmetic surgery in the media, a study showed that nearly 7/10 women (who make up the bulk of patients) still feel the subject is taboo. This combination of risky elements is what a recent issue of the Royal Society of Medicine's journal 'Clinical Risk' called "a perfect storm".

Some things are changing for the better, however. The spotlight shone on the sector by the PIP crisis and the subsequent review has spurred

some adjustments, including the launch of new safety initiatives such as insurance packages for cosmetic surgery revision. No surgical procedure is risk-free and even non-surgical treatments are still medical – and the public are beginning to learn that, unfortunately, the responsibility still weighs on them to do their homework.

Despite cosmetic surgery being hailed as a modern phenomenon, the quest and appreciation of beauty and youth is deeply ingrained in the human psyche – and indeed is part of our physical instincts. Hopefully soon we can create a regulatory framework that will help protect those who are simply seeking to look as good as they feel.

Tingy Simoes started her career in healthcare Public Relations over 15 years ago. In early 2002, Tingy launched her own consultancy, Wavelength Marketing Communications (www.wavelengthgroup.com) in London which has helped establish a number of high-profile organisations as the most respected voices in the medical sector. In 2012 Wavelength, which incorporates boutique sister agency Cacique Public Relations (ka'seek: 'leader of the tribe') won the Public Relations Consultants' Association (PRCA) award for their work during the PIP implant scandal. Tingy is the author of the first-ever PR handbook aimed at plastic surgeons and cosmetic doctors: "How to Cut it in the Media".