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Pre-op photos 'standard practice'

Docs say 'before and after' shots essential part of medical record

By POON CHIAN HUI

TAKING photographs of patients before and after plastic surgery or aesthetic procedures is "standard practice" and an essential part of medical documentation, say plastic surgeons.

They added that if the area to be operated on is near the private parts, it is best for the patient to be unclad.

One reason is that adjacent areas may be affected by the procedure, for instance, if an infection sets in.

Earlier this year, a teenager sued plastic surgeon Martin Huang and his clinic for emotional distress, after she had photographs taken without her underwear on.

She had consulted Dr Huang to get a scar on her upper thigh removed. The teen was to have been photographed without her bra, but when she asked if she could keep it on, was told she could. However, when pictures were taken of her thigh, a nurse suddenly pulled the teen's underwear off.

The case, settled out of court last week, was the first civil suit of its kind, where procedures such as photo-taking were being brought to

the courts. Details of the settlement are confidential but include the destruction of the photos and digital records and an open and unequivocal letter of apology and regret for his actions from the doctor.

Dr Huang later told the media that the pictures "were not wrongly taken", and the two parties had reached an amicable resolution without admission of liability.

This prompted the teen to say through her lawyer that his remarks upset her, and her parents are reviewing their legal options.

Dr Huang had argued that photos are standard practice – a point that other surgeons The Straits Times interviewed also agreed with.

Any photographs taken in a medical setting are strictly confidential and not for public viewing, they said.

Plastic surgeon J.J. Chua, who runs a private practice at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, said photos are needed to compare if the procedure has indeed improved the condition, and by how much.

"It's always important to have a baseline for comparison," he said, adding that some patients may also need the "before" pictures to make insurance claims.

Photos are also necessary to plan for surgery, said Dr Tan Ying Chien, consultant plastic surgeon at The Sloane Clinic Plastic Surgery Centre.

"Quite often, the surgery is not

done immediately; it can be one or two months later," he said. "By then, I might not be able to remember exactly what the patient's condition is."

Dr Tan added: "Photos are our equivalent of X-rays and scans."

Dr Waffles Wu, who practises at Camden Medical Centre, noted another purpose: medico-legal protection. "Some patients have very low tolerance; they make complaints about the slightest thing... We need to have pictures to prove these things."

Given a similar situation as Dr Huang's, he said he would have taken the pictures the same way, without the underwear.

This is in line with guidelines set by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, which many centres worldwide refer to.

"We have to include the adjacent areas – there cannot be any clothing obstructing the area," said Dr Wu. "But we will always try to keep as much modesty for the patient as possible."

Some of the surgeons said they probably would not require the patient to be topless, if the procedure did not involve the chest area.

Sometimes, patients may wear disposable underwear – but only if it will not distort or cover the area that needs to be captured, said Dr Karen Sng, president of the Singapore Society for Cosmetic (Aesthetic) Surgeons.

In cases where patients decline to have photos taken, the surgeons said

they are likely to turn the person away. They also said they could get into trouble if the patient made unreasonable complaints about the surgical results.

Dr Tan said: "Without those pictures, I haven't got a leg to stand on."

The photo-taking process differs slightly from clinic to clinic, but it can be done quickly, taking a few minutes.

For Dr Chua, the patient is asked to disrobe in another room first, either alone or with a nurse to assist. "At no point would the patient take off her clothes in front of me," he said.

The patient is then led into the photo-taking room, covered by a blanket. The blanket is removed only when the photo-taking starts.

Photos from several angles – for example, front, back and side – would be snapped. The nurse will then cover the patient with the blanket.

If pictures of the body are taken, the face will not be captured.

Dr Chua emphasised that doctors take these photos in a very professional manner. "These pictures are for medical reasons – there are no sexy poses or anything of the sort," he said.

Dr Sng added that a male doctor will have a female nurse in the room to chaperone female patients.

Patients also have to sign a written consent, usually together with consent for the surgery, for the photo-taking. If the surgeon wants to use the photos for educational purposes, he must first seek written consent from the patient, who is free to decline.

The Singapore Medical Council, which regulates the conduct of doctors here, said any image captured of a patient must "either be clinically indicated or necessary for an accurate record of a diagnosis or treatment".

Doctors have to adopt a professional attitude towards patients, and obtain informed consent where necessary, it said.

chpoon@sph.com.sg

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