

# Aesthetic medicine in the context of mental health and ethics

## *Medycyna estetyczna w kontekście zdrowia psychicznego i etyki*

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, one of the dominant cults is the worship of beauty and widely understood aesthetics, which are an inseparable element characteristic of modern civilization. The need for harmony or beauty is inherent in human nature, and one of their manifestations is the pursuit of physical attractiveness. Accepting one's appearance is an important aspect of everyone's life and an integral part of mental health and well-being. Treatments in the field of cosmetology and aesthetic medicine are aimed at improving the physical appearance and thus well-being. Popularization of aesthetic treatments that sometimes undergo mental health disorders or personality disorders. In the literature, one can find more and more items related to aesthetic medicine and mental health. As a result, such disciplines as psychodermatology, psychocosmetology, which study the influence of mental health on the state and physical appearance of the body, were

created. This subject should be of interest not only to people who use aesthetic treatments, but also those who perform treatments.

### DEVELOPMENT OF AESTHETIC MEDICINE

In modern times in Western civilization the most widespread and growing cult is the attractiveness of the body. Human beauty is a recognizable sign and a symbol of consumer culture, which is based on material values and superficiality. Due to the progressive development of medicine, the life span of a person has increased and the level of wealth has increased. As a result, aging of the body is increasingly perceived by the general public as a lack of self-care. On the other hand, ugliness is subconsciously equated with disease, disability. These factors explain social pressure in the pursuit of beauty and at the same time indicate that care for beauty and youthful appearance are inextricably linked with the development of civilization [1-3].

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### ABSTRACT

*Mental health is an integral part of physical health, and these elements coexist in close correlation with each other. As a result, mental disorders can affect physical appearance at the same time, and external body defects are reflected in the state of mental health.*

*The phenomenon illustrating this relationship are, among others, depression occurring in people with advanced acne or psoriasis. A flagship example of a mental disorder that directly affects the perception of the body is also dysmorphophobia. Despite the frequent improvement in the quality of life of people using the latest solutions in the broadly understood beauty industry, for many people the existence of aesthetic medicine is a moral dilemma.*

*The aim of the work was to draw attention to the problem of mental health in the context of the aesthetic industry and to discuss the ethical dilemmas of aesthetic medicine.*

**Keywords:** *aesthetic medicine, mental health, psychodermatology, ethics*

### STRESZCZENIE

Zdrowie psychiczne jest nieodłączną częścią zdrowia fizycznego, a elementy te współistnieją w ścisłej korelacji między sobą. Tym samym zaburzenia zdrowia psychicznego mogą wpływać jednocześnie na stosunek danej osoby do wyglądu zewnętrznego. Zjawiskiem obrazującym tę zależność są między innymi stany depresyjne występujące u osób z zaawansowanym trądzikiem czy łuszczycą. Przykładem zaburzenia psychicznego, które bezpośrednio oddziałuje na sposób postrzegania swojego ciała jest również dysmorfobia. Mimo częstej poprawy jakości życia osób korzystających z zabiegów estetycznych, dla wielu osób stanowią one moralny dylemat.

Celem pracy było zwrócenie uwagi na problem zdrowia psychicznego w kontekście zabiegów estetycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *medycyna estetyczna, zdrowie psychiczne, psychodermatologia, etyka*

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The market of aesthetic treatments has undergone great evolution in recent years. Every year, more and more offices and beauty treatments are created. An attractive and young appearance is of value to a large group of society [4]. The dissemination of aesthetic medicine can be seen in everyday life. Even 10 years ago, other people were surprised by the sight of enlarged lips or cheekbones modeled with a filler. Currently, these treatments are very popularized mainly by people from the public sector. It is the media that are another factor that significantly contributed to the development of aesthetology. The mass media have a huge impact on the model of the created ideal of beauty.

An example of such an action may be the choice of an anorexic model as the cover girl of the French magazine *Vogue* in 1965. The media then created a very slim image of the female body. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the emergence of a new cult of youth that continues today [5]. This trend, which continues to this day, was the starting point for the creation of the entire anti-aging department of aesthetic medicine and cosmetology. Currently, the most popular are all anti-aging measures that allow you to maintain a youthful appearance.

As a result, aesthetic treatments and cosmetics with anti-aging effects are still being refined. The mass media provide their recipients with information on anti-aging preparations and services, or those concealing aging symptoms. Such activities increase public awareness of the aesthetic market, which is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. According to a study commissioned by Estell by TNS Omnibus Polska, as many as 93% of Polish women believe that they should take care of themselves to keep their youthful appearance [6].

As an example of the heyday of aesthetic medicine, we can also cite the report of the BCMM research institute commissioned by Galderma Polska entitled: "Consumer behavior and attitudes towards aesthetic medicine treatments". Research from June 2018 shows that Poles are more and more interested in improving their appearance with the use of botox and hyaluronic acid. The estimated number of people in Poland who underwent aesthetic treatments is about 600,000 in 2018. Not only is the group of interested people growing, but also the group of people who are satisfied with the procedures already performed and plan to repeat them again. It is also worth noting that the percentage of men undergoing aesthetic procedures is increasing. The research also showed that Poles are more and more willing to share information about the procedures performed, which are associated with taking care of appearance and health [7]. The global value of the aesthetic medicine and plastic surgery market amounted to over EUR 8.5 billion in 2016, and the projected value in 2020 is estimated at around EUR 12 billion [8]. Despite the enormous development, aesthetic medicine is still a young and not fully explored field, and thus its image as perceived by society is changing dynamically.

Recently, the emergence of the "natural appearance" trend on the aesthetic market can also be observed. The new direction increases the popularity of treatments whose effects are more delicate and close to natural. Thus, for example, the so-called "baby botox", that is, a procedure that uses a smaller amount and a lower concentration of botulinum toxin compared to the standard procedure. Similarly, in the case of procedures with the use of tissue fillers, which are injected subcutaneously in a smaller volume or completely replaced, e.g. by administering tissue stimulators.

## MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CONTEXT OF AESTHETIC MEDICINE

According to the well-known and current WHO definition of health, it is defined as: "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" [9]. In the context of health, it is worth considering the role of aesthetic medicine itself, which more and more often (apart from the beautifying function) is also attributed to therapeutic use. Aesthetic treatments are also referred to as therapeutic procedures because they affect the mental and social well-being of a person, as indicated by the definition of health by the World Health Organization. There are also treatments in the field of aesthetic medicine carried out solely for therapeutic purposes, e.g. treatment of bruxism with the use of botulinum toxin.

According to the report of the study "Epidemiology of psychiatric disorders and access to psychiatric health care - EZOP Poland", as many as 23% of the Polish population experienced mental disorders at least once in their life [10]. This group also includes many people who use the services of aesthetic medicine clinics. People struggling with such problems constitute an increasing percentage of the population, which is why proper knowledge on this subject is so important. This is especially true for those whose daily work is based on contact with other people.

In 2019 a study was conducted on a group of 1,000 people using plastic surgery at the Medical University of Kansas. It has been shown that as many as 44.1% of them had experienced mental health problems in the past [11]. The cited studies illustrate how large the percentage of people who improve their appearance can be, while suffering from widely understood mental or personality disorders.

In the context of the relationship between mental health and aesthetic procedures, mention should be made of a relatively new field of medicine called psychodermatology. It is a discipline combining the subject of skin diseases and mental health, which is the area of joint and integrated participation of specialists in the field of dermatology, psychiatry, psychology and cosmetology. Psychodermatology is a concept that focuses on the skin as a reflection of the mind as mental states such as depression, anxiety and distorted body image can be linked to skin conditions. Specialists in the field of psychodermatology or psychocosmetology are

able to holistically look at a patient with ailments of skin diseases caused by psychophysiological disorders, e.g. psoriasis, atopic dermatitis and adolescent acne. The appropriate diagnostic and therapeutic process determines the selection of the appropriate therapy also in the context of aesthetic medicine treatments. Thus, it is possible for a specialist to notice in a given patient, for example, dysmorphophobia, which should be a factor disqualifying for many beauty procedures. As a result, extensive knowledge in the field of psychodermatology allows for an appropriate diagnosis of skin defects and finding the sources of the problem that often have a psychogenic background [12, 13].

## **ADDICTIONS TO TREATMENTS**

Addictions to aesthetic medicine treatments are complex disorders influenced by various components of a sociological and psychological basis. One of the determinants of the increasing popularity of beauty correction is the huge influence of the media. The omnipresent images of perfectly presented celebrities on television, on the Internet and in the press encourage observers to make changes in their appearance as well. The image of a slim body with perfect proportions and dimensions created by the media market causes enormous pressure among the society. In addition, the prevailing youth trend makes the sight of wrinkles on the skin a source of shame for some. Moreover, a large part of the population is convinced that an attractive appearance is an inseparable element for achieving success and improving the quality of life. Treatments in the field of aesthetic medicine can, on the one hand, significantly improve the well-being of people who use them, on the other hand, they pose a risk for people predisposed to addiction. The addictive desire to improve one's appearance is very often associated with other mental disorders. People addicted to aesthetic medicine treatments may be characterized by a narcissistic personality disorder distinguished by a constant need for adoration and a desire to be perceived as an ideal. People with a narcissistic disposition are characterized by their constant desire to be admired by others. This is why people with narcissistic personality disorder often choose aesthetic treatments that are related to the desire to achieve a perfect appearance. People addicted to improving their image treat subsequent visits to beauty salons as one of the ways to gain happiness. Unfortunately, with time it turns out, as in the case of all other forms of addiction, that in order to feel satisfied, the intensity of experiences should be increased, in this case the frequency of using aesthetic treatments. Such behavior can lead not only to a caricatured appearance, but also to the point where the addict will not be able to function properly without further visits to beauty salons.

In the context of the problem of addiction to aesthetic treatments, a properly conducted interview as well as interpersonal and psychological skills of a specialist are very important. As a result, the professional should be able to refuse the patient to undergo the procedure if it would result in an "exaggerated" and caricatured appearance. Specialists who are able to propose other solutions for a given aesthetic defect and individually select the method of its correction are especially appreciated.

It should also be remembered that working with human skin requires extensive knowledge of its physiology, and a specialist who performs aesthetic treatments should be aware of possible side effects related to the skin. In the case of suspecting disorders related to dysmorphophobia or addiction to aesthetic treatments, it is worth considering referring a given person to specialists in the broadly understood mental health [14].

## **DYSMORPHOPHOBIA**

Dysmorphophobia is a mental disorder related to incorrect perception of one's appearance. Affected people feel anxiety and discomfort related to the aesthetic defect of their body. Dysmorphophobia is also called "ugliness hypochondria" due to the constant belief of people about their unaesthetic appearance. There are various degrees of severity of the above-mentioned disorder, from mild conditions to very severe and extreme cases, which in some patients provoke thoughts and attempts of suicide. The main problem of people suffering from dysmorphophobia is the fact that only themselves perceive the apparent defect of beauty. The expectations of the above-mentioned people are also overstated regarding their own appearance and the effects of cosmetic treatments they undergo. Unfortunately, procedures in the field of cosmetology, aesthetic medicine or plastic surgery may not bring the results desired by patients [15, 17].

The popularization and relatively easy access to aesthetic medicine treatments make them available to people suffering from dysmorphophobic disorders. Unfortunately, performing various types of aesthetic treatments in these patients may turn out to be ineffective. In such a situation, it is important for the specialist to have a sufficient knowledge about mental health and be able to notice some kind of abnormalities in his patient's behavior [15].

## **ANOREXIA, BULIMIA, BIGOREXIA**

The problem of eating disorders is related to psychosomatization, consisting in the formation of physical symptoms that are a sign of mental ailments, such as stress or anxiety. There are also scientific studies suggesting a high degree of personality psychosomatization among the studied patients with various disorders of the digestive system [16]. An example illustrating this phenomenon is the role of long-term mental stress in the context of the emergence of eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia.

Anorexia is an increasingly common, especially in young women, psychogenic eating disorder. It is also called anorexia nervosa and is an obsession with achieving the desired body shape. People suffering from anorexia are constantly losing weight through the use of restrictive diets, the so-called “fasting”, which they often combine with too intense physical effort.

Doing so leads to a significant loss of body weight and the ultimate destruction of the body. The vast majority of young women suffer from anorexia when they see a distorted image of their body in the mirror [18]. Obsession with their own figure and appearance is also the reason why anorexics visit aesthetic medicine and cosmetology offices. A survey conducted in 2016 among 31 beauty salons in Świdnica showed that as many as every fourth office worker had direct contact with the problem of anorexia during their work [17]. People with anorexia nervosa obsessively try to change their body, also visiting plastic surgery and aesthetic medicine doctors. Anorexic women show interest in liposuction or partial removal of ribs to make their figure even more slender.

Another mental health disorder that proceeds in a similar way to anorexia is bulimia. The actions of people struggling with this disease also lead to an emaciated body shape, which results from the so-called bulimia nervosa consists of two stages. The first is when a bulimic experiences uncontrolled appetite attacks, during which she is able to eat large amounts of food.

The person then induces vomiting or uses laxatives to get rid of the previously eaten food. As a result, the body becomes extremely exhausted, as in the course of anorexia [18]. Both discussed diseases are conditioned by many factors, among which the lack of acceptance of one's body, low self-esteem and perfectionism in pursuit of the dream figure [19].

Another mental disorder related to body image is bigorexia, also known as muscle dysmorphia. In contrast to anorexia, it more often affects men who obsessively perceive their figure as insufficiently athletic. People affected by this disorder are able to spend most of the day in the gym, where they undertake very intense physical efforts. Despite their best efforts, they are still not satisfied with the speed of muscle growth.

In addition, bigorexics actively train even despite injuries or health problems, and neglect their professional and family duties at the expense of time spent in the gym. People struggling with bigorexia may also show a willingness to visit an aesthetic medicine doctor or a plastic surgeon to visually improve the appearance of their figure [19].

All of the above-mentioned disorders are directly related to obsession with your body. People who do not accept their own appearance and are prone to pressure from society regarding, for example, a perfect figure or the ubiquitous trend of healthy eating, are at particular risk. Anyone struggling with an incorrect perception of their own body may also show

a desire to use the services of aesthetic medicine to correct imaginary defects in their appearance. That is why the proper knowledge of people working in the aesthetic market about the described mental disorders is so important.

## DEPRESSION

The condition of the skin is closely related to the mental condition of a person. This means that dermatological diseases depend on mental health, and conversely, mental disorders can cause numerous dermatoses. Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses and can also run alongside skin conditions such as acne or psoriasis. For some people, dermatological diseases are a source of complexes, despondence, and also a reason to give up social life for fear of the public opinion. The estimated number of psychiatric disorders during the course of dermatoses is 30-60% [20]. Distorted body image also coexists with the course of depression. Low acceptance of one's appearance is a predictor of severe depression symptoms [21]. Mental factors can directly cause or worsen the condition of already existing dermatological diseases, such as atopic dermatitis, herpes, urticaria or psoriasis. There is also a type of “skin self-injury” called “neuropathic acne”, which is caused by the constant scratching of skin lesions under the influence of stress and mental disorders. There are also many phobias closely related to the condition of the skin. One of them is zoophobia, meaning the fear of imaginary parasites living in the patient's body. People affected by this disorder lead to self-mutilation of the body using sharp tools to extract imaginary insects from under the skin surface [22].

There are a number of aesthetic treatments that reduce the symptoms of dermatoses, such as acne, atopic dermatitis (AD) or psoriasis, which are often the starting point for the development of mental diseases. Also, excess body fat is a factor that exacerbates depression. Improving the appearance of the body can also significantly improve the mental state of the patient.

Treatments in the field of cosmetology and aesthetic medicine, which are perceived as beautifying, are also used in the treatment of scars and discoloration resulting from diseases such as traces of self-injury or neuropathic acne. It is possible in this case to use, for example, chemical peels, microdermabrasion or mesotherapy. These are just a few examples of treatments as alternative and supportive methods of therapy for people who have experienced mental disorders in the past.

## NEUROTIC DISORDERS

The neurotic disorders include obsessive compulsive disorders and obsessive compulsive disorders. Some of these conditions may be directly related to the appearance and condition of the skin. There is a type of disorder that is obsessively washing your hands frequently. Patients can clean

their hands even several dozen times a day because they have a constant impression that they are not clean enough.

People affected by this disorder may additionally use highly irritating detergents that significantly worsen the condition of the skin. Such activities lead to the development of pathological changes and dermatoses that require the initiation of dermatological treatment. There is also a type of acne called “neuropathic acne” which is a form of self-harm. It consists in obsessive scratching and constant attempts to “remove” acne lesions, which only results in deterioration of the skin condition and the appearance of more and more eruptions, wounds or cuts. Unfortunately, qualification for aesthetic treatments to improve the condition of the skin in a group of patients with mental health disorders may turn out to be ineffective. For example, performing chemical peels in people with neuropathic acne will only negatively affect the appearance of the skin [22, 23].

### ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF AESTHETIC MEDICINE

The process of aestheticization has always accompanied man. We can see attempts to embellish material things already in prehistoric times, when our original ancestors created paintings on the walls of caves, decorated their tools and everyday objects. The need for a sense of beauty and aesthetics is inherent in human nature. So, since we like to surround ourselves with pretty objects and constantly improve the appearance of material things, why not do the same with our body? [24]. For centuries man has attempted to correct the flaws of his appearance. Undoubtedly, this is due to the fact that a large part of the population is dissatisfied with their own beauty. Aesthetic medicine was created as an attempt to improve the physical appearance, and thus also improve the mental state of a person. The development of aesthetic treatments results not only from the progress of science and medicine, but above all from the needs of people. Despite their popularization, for some people, the existence of aesthetic medicine is an ethical dilemma that often raises extreme opinions. It is worth referring to the reform that has taken place in this respect over time in the church institution. From the very beginning of Christianity, all actions aimed at improving beauty were condemned and it was considered sinful to improve God’s work. The position of the Church on this subject has changed significantly. Pope John Paul II decided in 1989 that improving one’s beauty is not sinful as long as the activities serving it are in the appropriate place in the hierarchy of Christian values [2].

Despite the opinion of the Church, many people still consider treatments in the field of aesthetic medicine to be immoral. For a part of society, improving beauty is equated with dividing people into better people, whose appearance has been improved, and worse people, whose body has not been changed by aesthetic procedures. Nowadays, one of

the greatest cults is the worship of beauty, which has become an indicator of social status and success. The human body began to be an investment aimed at increasing the prestige and value of man. Undeniably, people considered more attractive cope better in certain areas of life, e.g. in finding a partner or in the labor market. Undoubtedly, therefore, some people treat a visit to an aesthetic medicine clinic as the key to improving not only their appearance, but most of all the possibility of changing their lives for the better. Some are convinced that their appearance is responsible for their success or lack of success, and they often equate their failures with low attractiveness. Magdalena Wieczorkowska devoted one of her articles to reflections on the marketization of the human body, comparing it to a commodity. The author of the text claims that human corporeality has become a kind of packaging that can be improved and increased in its value using aesthetic treatments. This leads to the process of marketing the body, which is an ethical dilemma. Moreover, the author of the article claims that medicine affects not only the appearance of a person, but also his mind and personality. As a result, it creates a risk of psychological problems such as depression and dysmorphophobia. One of the effects of the developing “beauty industry” is the objectification of the human body and emphasizing its material meaning. According to the author, the activity of aesthetic medicine, due to its commercial nature, is regulated by market rules, not moral values [25, 26].

The perception of the skills and functions performed by doctors is also changing. According to some, doctors should only deal with the treatment and prevention of human health. In the aesthetic industry, medical skills are combined with artistic techniques, and doctors, apart from the therapeutic aspects of their work, also began to “improve” the appearance of the human body [2].

There are also arguments thanks to which aesthetic medicine can be considered as devoid of negative moral overtones. First of all, a holistic approach to the person using beauty treatments should be emphasized. Aesthetic medicine doctors often collaborate with other specialists; a dermatologist, endocrinologist, psychiatrist or nutritionist. Already during the interview and diagnosis, it may turn out that the cosmetic defect with which a patient comes to the office has a much more serious and health-threatening background. As a result, the problem of too strong hair may be, for example, the cause of a disturbed hormonal balance, and a birthmark on the skin requires consultation with a dermatologist who excludes the presence of melanoma. The desire to look after the appearance of your body is also often a motivation to change your lifestyle to a healthier one. People who use aesthetic medicine treatments are more aware of the importance of a holistic approach to their body, which is why they are more and more willing

to combine, for example, a series of slimming treatments with a consultation with a dietitian or starting physical activity. Another aspect is the fact that aesthetology by reducing the symptoms of aging and improving the external appearance also has a positive effect on the psyche and well-being of a person. Thanks to this, regardless of the age group, people can function better in society and interpersonal relations [27].

Aesthetic medicine continues to generate debates and considerations regarding the ethical aspects of this branch's existence. The position of some is supported by arguments that people are becoming objectified and segregated. A negative symptom related to the development of aesthetic medicine is also the marketization of the body and the change in the function of doctors from therapeutic to artistic. On the other hand, it contributes to improving people's well-being and improving their quality of life.

## SUMMARY

It is hard to find in the literature any works describing the relationship between aesthetic treatments and mental health. The benefits of discussing this issue may be useful when creating individual treatment therapies, both for patients under the care of psychiatrists or psychologists, as well as for people who perform aesthetic and related treatments. Mental health disorders in people using the services of aesthetic medicine clinics should be noticed by an experienced specialist during the initial consultation. The external appearance of the body is often a reflection of mental health. That is why proper diagnosis, interview and interdisciplinary cooperation are so important: aesthetic medicine doctors, dermatologists, cosmetologists, psychologists and psychiatrists in order to refer patients to the appropriate specialists.

As a result, clients of aesthetic medicine clinics have the opportunity to take a broader and more holistic look at their body, in the context of both mental and physical health.

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