

The Face of Change

by Melanie Sim

Plastic surgeon Dr Leo Kah Woon transforms patients' bodies and lives



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BEING THE FACE of change is a calling that comes naturally to Dr Leo Kah Woon. His is a position that makes a twofold difference in people's lives – enhancing their outer beauty and also inspiring inner confidence.

The youngest of three children, Dr Leo credits his parents' model of unstinting hard work as a major influence on his attitude to life. They worked hard to bring up their children – his father kept long hours at his tailor shop in Peninsula Shopping Centre while his mum busied herself daily with helping him at the shop, doing household chores and caring for the children.

"The only time they had a chance to catch a breather was when the shop was closed for the Chinese New Year celebrations," Dr Leo recalls fondly. "Their diligence and dedication to family and work even up till today inspires me and I strive to live my life by the example they have set."

His hard work has culminated in the fulfilment of a dream. Dr Leo set up his very own clinic, Dr Leo Aesthetic Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery Pte Ltd in 2014. Now, the energetic doctor is all set to help others achieve their own dreams of having the face and body they long for.

Ezyhealth: Where did your interest in plastic surgery stem from?

Dr Leo: I have always been interested in visual arts. As a child, I won numerous

prizes at art competitions. I was also a curious child who was piqued by the science of how things worked. So naturally I gravitated towards a career that could marry my twin interests of art and science.

When I qualified to study medicine, I decided that among all the surgical professions, plastic surgery is the one that really requires an eye for detail and gives an opportunity to create, restore and enhance aesthetic beauty.

When I first did a plastic surgery rotation as a medical officer, I was drawn to the specialty due to the breadth of the surgeries it offers. From a simple laser resurfacing to complex head and neck reconstruction the next moment, the possibilities and variety seemed endless.

Ezyhealth: There has been an upward trend of people seeking aesthetic surgery. What do you think has caused this boom in the industry?

Dr Leo: The rising affluence of society has caused a huge demand in plastic surgery as the population moves beyond merely subsistence of living to wanting enhancements in themselves to increase their own self-confidence.

The Internet and social media have impacted and raised the popularity of plastic surgery. With the Internet, information is now widely available to the patients and hence they are

more educated regarding the various treatments available for them. The social media craze where people are constantly "seen" by friends and contacts via Facebook and Instagram has also fuelled vanity and hence increased the demand for aesthetic surgery. Frequently, patients come to my clinic pointing out imperfections in their faces when they take selfies or take photos and post on social media.

In addition, plastic surgery is now seen as socially "more acceptable" – although first popularised by celebrities undergoing physical transformation with plastic surgery, now, even the man in the street desires to look younger and better.

Ezyhealth: How has the face of aesthetic treatments changed since the beginning and how will it further evolve?

Dr Leo: Minimally invasive techniques and technology will continue to develop as patients continue to look for procedures with little down time and sustained results. In addition, therapies which combine surgery with non-invasive techniques like lasers and injectables for the best results in patients will soon be the mainstay.

I think stem cells will be the future of plastic surgery, with stem cells potentially growing new hair and new skin for patients.

Ezyhealth: What common misconceptions do people have about plastic surgery?

Dr Leo: The first misconception is that plastic surgery only equates to cosmetic surgery. In actual fact, plastic surgery is derived from the Greek word "plastikos" which means "to mould or to shape". Hence, plastic surgery is really about restoring form and function to the patient. Other than cosmetic surgery, a plastic surgeon is also involved in reconstructive surgery (post-tumour resection, post-accident), cleft and craniofacial surgery, as well as burns surgery.

Another misconception is that plastic surgery is associated with long downtime for the patients. With the advances in surgical techniques and technology, many plastic surgery procedures are minimally invasive in nature with little downtime and less discomfort for the patients.

Ezyhealth: How does one choose a safe and effective treatment and aesthetic practitioner?

Dr Leo: If a treatment sounds too good to be true, it probably is! With the onslaught of advertising nowadays, many treatments are touted to be "the best" and patients are confused by the numerous choices available.

Before one embarks on plastic surgery, I strongly recommend that the

patient does his/her own research and verifies in particular the experience and credentials of his/her surgeon. Choosing a certified plastic surgeon is very important. All Ministry of Health certified plastic surgeons can be found on the Singapore Association of Plastic Surgeons website.

And importantly, the patient must also feel comfortable with the surgeon as plastic surgery is all about the details and so it is vital that the patient is open with his/her surgeon.

Ezyhealth: What are the treatments and surgeries commonly sought by patients at your clinic?

Dr Leo: Eyelid surgery continues to be very popular. Younger patients are always looking for "double eyelids" and the more matured patients are looking for eye bag correction. Other surgeries in high demand include breast augmentation and rhinoplasty. Common minimally invasive procedures done on a daily basis at my clinic include laser therapy, Botulinum toxin and filler injections. With regards to reconstructive surgery, I also do a lot of breast reconstruction for patients with breast cancer as well as lower limb reconstruction post-trauma.

Ezyhealth: You have a large patient list for body contouring and weight loss. What is body contouring all about and who is it recommended for?

Dr Leo: Bariatric surgery is a relatively new surgery that has been gaining popularity in Singapore. It is used for patients with morbid obesity as well as uncontrolled diabetes. After bariatric surgery, patients typically lose, on average, 40 – 50kg of body weight. This results in loose skin all over the body especially over the arms, breasts, abdomen and thighs. Body contouring entails excising this excess skin so that the patient regains a shapely body contour.

Ezyhealth: What do you love most about your job?

Dr Leo: I love my job because I know what I do directly affects how a patient feels and looks. Frequently, these results are immediate. The smile on their faces as they regain their confidence is priceless!

Ezyhealth: You're a plastic surgeon, a speaker, an Adjunct Assistant Professor with the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, and Secretary for both the Singapore Association of Plastic Surgeons as well as the Singapore Society of Cosmetic (Aesthetic) Surgeons. How do you find time for everything?

Dr Leo: We live in a distracted society where people spend a lot of time doing mindless channel or web surfing. I think if you set your priorities right and "don't put off for later what you can do now", you will always find enough time to do what you need to do in your life.

Ezyhealth: You participate regularly in humanitarian mission work, such as performing cleft lip and palate surgeries on underprivileged patients in China, Indonesia and Vietnam. What do you take away from these experiences?

Dr Leo: Operating in these countries makes me realise how fortunate we are to be living in Singapore with access to one of the best healthcare systems in the world. A lot of these patients in developing countries delay seeking treatment for conditions like cleft lip and palate as they simply cannot afford the treatment, or the treatment is just not available where they are staying.

Ezyhealth: What has been the high point of your career so far?

Dr Leo: That would definitely be starting my own private practice. eh