

Chief of Plastic Surgery at Scripps La Jolla enjoys helping people “feel better about themselves”

What drew John Smoot, chief of plastic surgery at Scripps Memorial Hospital, to his medical subspecialty is the fact that it’s “very problem-oriented.”

“You have a problem, you solve it and you move on.” And that’s exactly what the Utah-born surgeon has been doing for the past 20 years for his patients in San Diego, determining their problems, solving them and moving on.

He realized early in his career as a resident in general surgery that taking care of “really sick patients,” many with chronic ailments, was not what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

That’s when he decided to follow in his older brother’s footsteps as a plastic surgeon working more with outpatients who are essentially healthy but, for whatever personal reasons, want to improve how they look.

We interviewed Dr. Smoot recently in his offices and surgery on the third floor of the Ximed Building on the campus of Scripps Memorial Hospital, La Jolla, where he shares a practice with his brother, Dr. Wendell Smoot, who started the

practice 30 years ago, and Dr. Richard A.K. Chaffoo. All three are Fellows of the American College of Surgeons (F.A.C.S.). A family man and father of five, Smoot looks very much like you might expect a successful plastic surgeon to look—6-foot-1,210 pounds, who keeps in shape with a vigorous regimen of gym workouts, running, walking and hiking, while admitting it doesn’t get easier as you get older. He’s a 55-year-old baby boomer.

Explaining his choice of medical subspecialty, he said: “I got in this not because I wanted to treat vanity. I got in this to make people feel better about themselves. This is not about taking something that is particularly abnormal and making it normal,” he elaborated. “It’s taking something that’s normal and making it better. My goal in my practice is to talk to someone who has a particular image of themselves and, if that image and what it projects is not close, then to try to get those closer together. When you do that, they get more of a sense of wholeness, a sense of fulfillment, and tend to feel better

about themselves.”

Smoot is board certified as a cosmetic plastic surgeon and reconstructive surgeon, although the bulk of his practice—95 percent—is devoted to cosmetic surgery. About 90 percent of his patients are women, and, by far, the most popular procedure is breast augmentation and minimal-incision breast lifts, followed by liposuctions, facial surgeries, tummy tucks and breast reductions. He personally does about 600 to 1,000 procedures a year, including 200 to 300 breast surgeries and some 40 to 50 facial surgeries.

His offices contain a fully-accredited 5,000-square-foot surgery center with two state-of-the-art operating rooms, a three-bed recovery unit and a support staff of 17. The most popular non-surgical cosmetic procedure is botox facial rejuvenation injections, followed by medical-grade peels and laser hair removal. “I like doing everything,” he said. “I enjoy doing all of it. So I’m not just limited to one particular procedure.”

Smoot was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah. His father was a professional money manager. His mother was a homemaker. There were five children in the family. The three brothers all became doctors. Smoot is proud that he is a sixth-generation “pioneer” in the Mormon faith. His great-great grandfather, A.O. Smoot, accompanied Brigham Young to Utah in 1847. Smoot earned his B.A. in biology (1977) and his M.D. (1982) from the University of Utah, followed by an internship in general surgery at Chicago Medical School’s Affiliated Hospitals, 1982-83; a residency in general surgery, Providence Hospital, Southfield, Michigan 1983-86; and a

residency in plastic surgery at The Cronin Brauer & Biggs Clinic, St. Joseph’s Hospital, Houston, Texas, 1986-88.

Asked what a person should look for in a doctor when considering undergoing plastic surgery, he said: “You can’t always, no matter who you go to, end up with a perfect result all the time. But you can do things to enhance or ensure you get the best result possible.” What he recommends first is going to a surgeon who is board certified, as he and his partners are, by the American Board of Plastic Surgery. And second, review the experience of the surgeon and make sure he or she has privileges with a local hospital. “Experience is a great indicator of the quality of work.”

What makes a good plastic surgeon, he said, is “someone who understands the nature of what they do and does it well...You may teach a monkey how to do surgery, but what you can’t teach a monkey is why and when to not operate. That’s the great decision factor: how much to do, how much not to do.” All surgery, he cautioned, entails risks. “There is no risk-free surgery... but the important thing is to minimize those risks.” While employing a board certified surgeon doesn’t guarantee there can’t be complications, a well-trained, certified

surgeon will know how to deal with complications should they arise, he said. Most patients, he added, understand that surgical procedures often result in some pain and discomfort “and as long as they understand that, we do OK.”

Asked if a person can become addicted to cosmetic plastic surgery, Smoot conceded that some do, “but we try to make sure we’re operating on people for the right reasons. And that’s very important. You can operate on people who, if they have the wrong reason, will be unhappy, no matter what you do. So part of what we have to do is look at the psychological profile...to make sure what they’re asking for is appropriate to what we can deliver.” Some potential patients, he said, come in because their husband or boyfriend wants them to. “You’re asking for trouble, or if they have some psychological disorders...and have a distorted image of what their body really is.”

Most cosmetic surgeries are not covered by insurance. Prices vary from surgeon to surgeon, but, typically, a patient undergoing breast augmentation can expect to pay from \$5,000 to \$7,000 and for a face lift anywhere from \$12,000 to \$25,000. Last year, Americans spent \$8.4 billion on cosmetic surgical procedures and \$4.8 billion on cosmetic nonsurgical procedures, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

Nationally, the most frequently performed nonsurgical procedure



NAME:
JOHN SMOOT, M.D., F.A.C.S.

DISTINCTION:
A plastic and reconstructive surgeon for 20 years, Dr. John Smoot was appointed Chief of Plastic Surgery at Scripps Memorial Hospital, La Jolla, in 2007.

BORN:
Salt Lake City, Utah
55 years ago.

was Botox injections and the most popular surgical procedure was liposuction. As for the future of plastic surgery, he foresees that “plastic surgery is going to go to less invasive procedures, less surgery and more skin care types of procedures. There still will be no substitute for good surgical technique, but it will change...People want more with less so we have to develop new and better techniques to do less surgery yet get as good a result.” Smoot recently entered into a partnership agreement with Casa Blanca Salon and Spa in Rancho Santa Fe’s Del Rayo Village to offer on-site non-surgical cosmetic procedures utilizing Botox and Restylane skin-smoothing injections, peels and laser hair removal.

