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Scottsdale is a destination for nip-and-tuck crowd

By Shanna Hogan
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FAT ZAPPER: Dr. Todd Malan removes fat and liquid from a patient undergoing Smartlipo, a laser procedure to melt the fat, at the Intimate Rejuvenation and Innovative Surgery Center in Scottsdale.

Laura Segall For the Tribune

While many tourists come to Scottsdale for the upscale resorts, golfing or shopping, Yuma resident Nancy Patterson came for plastic surgery. The 41-year-old personal trainer had breast augmentation done over the weekend, stayed a few days and recovered in a lavish room at Scottsdale's Doubletree Resort. "I live in a pretty small town and there are some plastic surgeons here, but everyone we talked to had it done somewhere else," she said. "There's a mentality that in Scottsdale the doctors are going to be better."

An abundance of highly skilled surgeons and exclusivity of procedures has earned Scottsdale a reputation as a plastic surgery mecca.

There are 71 cosmetic and plastic surgeons in Scottsdale, according to the Arizona Medical Board. That's only three fewer than Phoenix, Chandler, Mesa, Tempe and Gilbert combined.

And in recent years, that reputation has fueled a market for cosmetic surgery tourism, attracting patients, such as Patterson, from around the state and across the country.

"Scottsdale is a mecca for plastic surgery, well-known throughout the United States," said Dr. Todd Malan, a surgeon at the Intimate Rejuvenation and Innovative Surgery Center. "Patients identify with Scottsdale as a place where you have highquality work."

Last month, Malan and his partner, Dr. Karen Starkey, moved their cosmetic surgery practice from Chandler to Scottsdale. The move was necessary not only because the majority of their in-state patients were coming from Scottsdale, but because a Scottsdale address gives their practice cachet, Malan said.

"Its kind of a funny thing. Patients will travel from anywhere from around the Valley to come to Scottsdale," Malan said. "We still have patients who live in Gilbert or Chandler who would prefer to drive to our Scottsdale office."

Malan's office specializes in vaginal restoration surgeries. In addition, he is one of only 15 doctors in the country to perform a new, less invasive form of liposuction which uses laser technology to melt the fat.

Because the type of procedures he performs can't be found in many other parts of the country, about 80 percent of Malan's patients come from out of state. He even reserves Fridays for patients from out of state or country, who travel from as far away as Saudi Arabia, he said.

Scottsdale doctors who perform only traditional procedures also find patients coming from throughout the country for plastic surgery.

"I get a lot of patients from all over the state," said Dr. Robert Cohen, of the Scottsdale Center for Plastic Surgery. "For whatever the reason, we have a very strong group of plastic surgeons who work out of this area, and it's built quite a reputation for our city."

Out-of-state patients come to Scottsdale for the privacy, the skill of the surgeons or because plastic surgery is cost prohibitive in some other parts of the country, Cohen said.

"In Scottsdale, there is more of a reasonable ceiling on what plastic surgeons charge," he said. "It's definitely cheaper here than it is in L.A., which I think is one thing that attracts patients from Los Angeles to Scottsdale."

Scottsdale's resorts also provide the perfect getaway for patients looking to recover in private, said Rachel Pearson, Scottsdale Convention and Visitors Bureau spokeswoman.

"With so many of our luxury resorts who pride themselves on privacy and offering people a hideaway with a lot of pampering, it's a good fit for someone recuperating from cosmetic surgery," she said.

One concern is that with Scottsdale's high number of skilled plastic surgeons also come a certain number of unskilled surgeons setting up shop in the city, said Dr. Robert Meger, a plastic surgeon based in Phoenix.

"Because there is such a mecca, its attracting all these people who aren't properly trained," he said. "They call themselves cosmetic surgeons, and they're not certified."

Cosmetic surgery is a lucrative field because patients pay up front and doctors don't have to wait for reimbursement through Medicare or insurance companies.

Because of the lure of the cosmetic surgery dollar, doctors in other specialties have begun to perform cosmetic procedures. Doctors certified as plastic surgeons, through the American Board of Plastic Surgeons, have been specially trained in cosmetic surgery and are usually more qualified, Meger said.

Still, patient complaints and malpractice suits aren't any more common in the plastic surgery than in other medical specialties, said Rodger Downey, spokesman for the Arizona Medical Board.

"We get complaints that cover the gamut," he said. "I haven't seen any special increase in plastic surgery complaints."

As for the type of procedures, Scottsdale differs from other parts of the country. Nationally, liposuction is considered the most popular procedure. However, local doctors say breast augmentation is the most commonly requested Scottsdale procedure.

"There are so many augmented breasts out there. Getting breast implants is like getting braces on your teeth anymore," Meger said. "And as a population, our patients want larger implants than in other parts of the country."

A desire for larger breasts is what lured Glendale resident Cynthia Jahn to Scottsdale. Jahn went to the Scottsdale Center for Plastic Surgery to increase her cup size from a small B to a full C.

"My husband didn't want me to do it, but I finally I told him this is something I need to do and want to do for myself," she said. "We're both extremely happy with the results."

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