

# Part VI

## *Choosing a Physician*

When choosing a physician for hair loss, there are two aspects to consider - diagnosis and treatment. Physicians who treat hair loss will often be able to diagnose hair loss but sometimes may opt to defer treatment for medical causes to more qualified individuals. Often primary care physicians, such as family physicians, internal medicine physicians, or gynecologists, can diagnose straight forward hair loss. Dermatologists are specially trained in diagnosing and treating diseases of the skin including hair loss and referral to a dermatologist may be necessary in more difficult cases. For hair loss treatment by surgical hair restoration procedures, it is important to choose an experienced and trained physician to get the best results possible.

There is a huge market for hair loss treatments which has spawned many businesses which claim to treat hair loss. Surgical treatment too has several large multinational organizations which provide treatment, sometimes at the cost of personalized care and individual results.

There is no set method to choosing a physician. First and foremost, you must be comfortable with the person to whom you are trusting your face. The rest of the suggestions provided should be taken together as a whole to make your decision. No one factor is more important than another in determining a competent physician. Taken as a whole, they provide a good starting point to get the best results possible.

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## Board Certification

Board Certification refers to accreditation a physician receives by completing some form of testing to demonstrate competence in a specific field. In the United States, the standards for board certification are administered by the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS), a not-for-profit organization. The ABMS is composed of 24 approved medical specialty boards. These boards include:

- allergy and immunology
- anesthesiology
- colon and rectal surgery
- dermatology
- emergency medicine
- family medicine
- internal medicine
- medical genetics
- neurological surgery
- nuclear medicine
- obstetrics and gynecology
- ophthalmology
- orthopaedic surgery
- otolaryngology
- pathology
- pediatrics
- physical medicine and rehabilitation
- plastic surgery
- preventative medicine
- psychiatry and neurology
- radiology
- surgery
- thoracic surgery
- urology

Each board has its own set of criteria to become board certified. Generally these criteria include completion of an MD or DO degree program in the United States or equivalency testing for foreign medical graduates; completion of a board approved training program (often referred to as residency); completion of a written and oral examination; and for some surgical specialties, demonstration of skill competency through a certain

period of time in practice or submission of case logs. Each board as well may have specialty areas which provide additional certification through associated boards. Before 2000, board certification was performed once in a physician's career. As of 2006, board certification must be renewed every 10 years though certain physicians have been grandfathered into the lifetime certificates.

Currently, there is **no** ABMS member board which certifies hair restoration surgeons. Therefore, consideration is made to a broader category of cosmetic and reconstructive procedure certification. The three boards generally acknowledged to train physicians in cosmetic and reconstructive skin procedures are: The American Board of Dermatology, the American Board of Otolaryngology, and the American Board of Plastic Surgery. According to the ABMS website:

- *“A Dermatologist is trained to diagnose and treat pediatric and adult patients with disorders of the skin, mouth, external genitalia, hair and nails, as well as a number of sexually transmitted diseases. The Dermatologist has had additional training and experience in the diagnosis and treatment of skin cancers, melanomas, moles and other tumors of the skin, the management of contact dermatitis and other allergic and nonallergic skin disorders, and in the recognition of the skin manifestations of systemic (including internal malignancy) and infectious diseases. Dermatologists have special training in dermatopathology and in the surgical techniques used in dermatology. They also have expertise in the management of cosmetic disorders of the skin such as hair loss and scars and the skin changes associated with aging.”*
- *“An Otolaryngologist-Head and Neck Surgeon, provides comprehensive medical and surgical care for patients with diseases and disorders that affect the ears, nose and throat, the respiratory and upper alimentary systems, and related structures of the head and neck. The Otolaryngologist diagnoses and provides medical and/or surgical therapy or prevention of diseases, allergies, neoplasms, deformities, disorders and/or injuries of the ears, nose, sinuses, throat, respiratory and upper alimentary systems, face, jaws and the other head and neck systems. Head and neck oncology, facial plastic and reconstructive surgery and the treatment of disorders of hearing and voice are fundamental areas of expertise.” Further training can be undertaken to obtain a subspecialty in Plastic surgery Within the Head and Neck.*
- *“A Plastic Surgeon deals with the repair, reconstruction or replacement of physical defects of form or function involving the skin, musculoskeletal system, craniomaxillofacial structures, hand, extremities, breast and trunk and external genitalia or cosmetic enhancement of these areas of the body. Cosmetic surgery is an essential component of plastic surgery. The Plastic Surgeon uses cosmetic surgical principles to both improve overall appearance and to optimize the outcome of reconstructive procedures. The surgeon uses*

*aesthetic surgical principles not only to improve undesirable qualities of normal structures but in all reconstructive procedures as well.*

*Special knowledge and skill in the design and surgery of grafts, flaps and free tissue transfer and replantation is necessary. Competence in the management of complex wounds, the use of implantable materials and in tumor surgery is required. Plastic Surgeons have been prominent in the development of innovative techniques such as microvascular and craniomaxillofacial surgery, liposuction and tissue transfer. Anatomy, physiology, pathology and other basic sciences are fundamental to the specialty.*

*Competency in Plastic Surgery implies an amalgam of basic medical and surgical knowledge, operative judgment, technical expertise, ethical behavior and interpersonal skills to achieve problem resolution and patient satisfaction”*

There is no national law which sets forth criteria for what organization can call themselves a board or provide physicians with board certification. Some ‘board certification’ involves simply paying a fee and receiving a certificate, similar to belonging to a medical society. Should you question the qualifications for a board certification, be sure to visit the board’s web site. Reputable national boards will provide the qualifications for certification and identify qualified physicians. At minimum, the certification should include a written examination, verbal examination, and some form of continuing maintenance of certification.

Remember that appropriate board certification ensures that a physician has the minimum competency in his/her field. This does not guarantee results or that a physician has had appropriate training in newer procedures introduced since residency.

Special mention should be made of the American Board of Hair Restoration Surgery (ABHRS). The ABHRS is not a member board of the ABMS but does certify surgeons in hair restoration surgery through experience, written testing, and oral testing. Due to the lack of ABMS membership, lack of oversight by any nationally recognized governing board, and no official medical residency in hair restoration, most states do not recognize ‘board certification’ from the ABHRS and limit advertising this credential. Because of these limitations, many well qualified physicians do not undertake the added expense of credentialing with the ABHRS.

## **Training**

Ensure that a physician is trained to do what they are doing. If a

physician is board certified and the certifying board condones cosmetic and reconstructive procedures, this will ensure a basic training has been undertaken. If a physician is board certified by a board which does not specifically deal with cosmetic and reconstructive concerns, ensure that the physician has gone through additional extensive training in hair restoration surgery. For some this may include additional observation of physicians or extensive training courses. Beware though of physicians who have a certification from a weekend course or some other process to do something which is completely outside of their initial medical training.

Though board certification will ensure the basic training to participate in a particular field of medicine, just completing a residency does not ensure that a physician is trained in the procedures they are performing. Simply asking how many of a procedure a physician has performed also is not completely informative. Adding 2+2 and getting 5 several hundred times does not make it happen. Similarly, just because someone has performed 500 hair transplant procedures, doesn't mean that they perform them well or can adequately address the desires you have for your procedure. Training and experience must be taken together with all of the other criteria before choosing a physician.

### **Faculty Appointments**

Physicians do not have to be employed by a university to have an appointment to the faculty of the university. Often, private practice physicians will volunteer time to teach at medical schools and residency programs. For their time, they may receive an appointment as a clinical faculty to the medical school. These appointments usually do not have any monetary reimbursement associated with them but reflect the physician's commitment to continuing education.

### **Articles and Presentations**

Though the demands of a busy practice can be great, physicians will often publish peer reviewed articles in scientific journals and speak at national and international physician society meetings. There is generally no financial reward for these presentations and journal articles. By writing and presenting, a physician shows commitment to continuing education, illustrates that they have techniques which other physicians are interested in learning, and demonstrates that they have enough patient flow to report results in the medical literature. Peer review indicates

that the articles or presentations are reviewed by other physicians in the same field before publishing. In contrast to columns published in mainstream media, a peer reviewed publication requires approval of other physicians before publishing helping to ensure that topical and factual presentations are presented.

### **Hospital Privileges**

Unfortunately all medical procedures have some risks, even hair restoration procedures. Though significant complications with hair restoration procedures are rare, they do occur and hence the need for informed consent. For a physician to practice medicine, hospital privileges are not required. Unfortunately, some complications from hair restoration procedures do require hospitalization and as such, having a physician who can admit you to the hospital can be life saving. If your physician does not have hospital privileges, you may be entrusted to the care of someone who is not familiar with the procedure that you underwent or you may have to be sent to a facility with a higher level of care a distance from your initial physician. Be sure to ask your physician where they have hospital privileges.

### **Local versus National**

The cash nature of the business and large population with hair loss has sprouted a large industry. Many national and international firms employ physicians to perform hair restoration procedures. While some of these physicians are very good at what they do, caution should be taken. Patient's should remember that they are often entering into a contract with a large corporation whose focus is on the bottom line and not the hairline. Local physicians with roots in the community will be interested in obtaining good results for a patient, not only for the patient's benefit but to maintain their reputation in the community. Local physicians are more likely to make accommodations for patients when things do not turn out as expected. Most physicians performing cosmetic surgery understand that the surgery is a large investment and only the beginning of the doctor/patient relationship.

### **Hair Technicians**

Not enough can be said about choosing a physician with experienced hair technicians. Follicular unit grafting techniques require dissecting hundreds if not thousands of individual hair follicles. This can not

be undertaken by just one person. Technicians are vital to assisting the physician in dissecting the individual follicles and placing them. Ensure that any physician you are considering working with utilized only highly trained and experienced hair technicians. This will decrease the operative time and improve hair survival in the long run. Be sure to ask what part the technician plays in the procedure though. Unless they are appropriately licensed in the state, such as nurses or some surgical technicians, hair technicians should not be performing injections. They should definitely not be left to perform either donor site harvesting or recipient site incisions. These are procedures which should be performed only by the physician.

Some physicians will employ hair technicians full time. Others may opt to contract with certain hair technicians on an as needed basis. There are many hair technicians who fly around the country assisting doctors in transplants but do not work with only one physician. In either case, ensure that your physician is employing hair technicians who are experienced and not simply employing untrained man power to perform the dissections and placement.

### **Microscope Usage**

Much attention has been focussed on microscope usage for hair dissection. Studies have indicated a slightly greater yield and slightly decreased follicular transection rate with microscopes over other methods of magnification. There have been no studies which indicate if this results in a difference in the outcome for the patient though. Magnification is the key to dissection. Loupe magnification is available which is as powerful as some microscopes. Ensuring that some type of magnification is used is essential to ensuring the best results.

### **Consultation**

The consultation is the time for the patient to become familiar with the physician's practice, develop a rapport with the physician, and receive a diagnosis and treatment plan. It is not the time for high pressure sales pitches. Any treatment relies on a specific diagnosis and for patients contemplating hair transplants informed consent is vital before undertaking a procedure. Any consultation must include a visit with a physician. While consultants can be excellent resources to introduce patients to a physician's practice and inform patients about routines before and after surgery, only a physician can ensure that a patient has an

accurate diagnosis of the cause of the patient's hair loss and an accurate treatment plan.

### **Fellowships**

There are no fellowships certified by the American Board of Medical Specialties or any of its member boards. Physicians may advertise that they did a fellowship in hair restoration but this often reflects a time under the tutelage of someone who performs hair restoration. Since there is no accrediting organization there is no method to determine if standards are maintained or if the fellowship is teaching the current technology.

### **Facility and Equipment**

Most hair restoration procedures are performed in a physician's office. This is very safely done but a couple of pitfalls must be pointed out. There are no national organizations which certify a physician's office as safe and in compliance with industry standard safety principles. Although hair restoration surgery has very few serious risks, anytime anything is injected into the body and surgical procedures are undertaken, there is the risk of allergic reactions. Instruments are often reused and must be sterilized between uses. To ensure that you are in a safe environment, ensure that your physician and his office have at least basic safeguards. These basic safeguards include:

- Autoclave with regular spore testing for sterility
- Protocols for cleaning equipment between patients
- If multiple procedures are performed at the same time, protocols for ensuring that donor hair is not mixed between patients
- Basic life support and/or advanced life support current certification for the physician and his staff
- Oxygen
- Defibrillator
- Advanced life support medications

Having an autoclave is important, but ensuring that it is functioning correctly with regular spore testing is essential. The testing is usually carried out by outside laboratories and your physician should be able to produce a log or other evidence that routine testing is being performed.

The physician and his staff should be trained in basic life support protocols through the American Heart Association and have the basic equipment necessary to deal with medical emergencies until paramedics can arrive.

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Simply knowing what to do without the proper tools is useless.

### **Second Opinion**

As you will read in the advertising pitfalls section, there are very few, if any, procedures in the world which are performed by only one surgeon. It is wise to obtain a second opinion, especially about hair restoration procedures where diagnosis and design of the treatment plan are probably more important than the technical skill of the surgeon. Be careful though and make sure if you are shopping price that you are comparing apples to apples (more discussion in the Advertising Pitfalls section).

## Suggested Questions to Ask Your Physician

### *What is your educational background?*

This should include not only residency programs but also specialized training in hair restoration surgery.

### *Are you board certified?*

As discussed, there is no board which certified hair restoration surgeons. Importance should be placed on finding a physician certified in surgery with education in cosmetic and reconstructive facial surgery.

### *Where do you have hospital privileges?*

As discussed above, hospital privileges are important should an untoward reaction occur.

### *What parts of the procedure do you perform and what do you delegate to your technicians?*

Hair technicians are vital in hair restoration surgery - but physicians are absolutely key. After all, you are allowing the procedure to be performed by the physician, not the technicians. Setting up the ground rules in advance can save disaster later.

### *What life support equipment and training do you have?*

Ensuring that your physician has both the training and equipment to deal with emergencies should they occur can be life saving.

### *What method of anesthesia do you use?*

Be sure to address the method of anesthesia with your surgeon. If you think that local anesthesia will not be enough for you, ask your surgeon if she is comfortable with other types of anesthesia. The type of anesthesia will all dictate if you need a driver, what you can eat before the surgery, and if you need help after surgery.