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Section: Vintage Lifestyles

Cosmetic surgery

Fixing the outside to match the inside

By Steve Barkhurst

Special to The Record

Since 2001 reconstructive surgery to remove a "turkey gobbler" neck, Herb McLean, 74, has agreed with what he sees in the mirror. "I'm physically and mentally a decade younger than the stereotype, and now I look it," he said, as he dried off from exercising in the pool of his Oakdale home. Page V2. (Record photo by STEVE BARKHURST)

Herb McLean isn't a vane person. The 74-year-old Oakdale resident is retired, so he doesn't have to worry about looking young at work. His wife, Maurine, 72, loves him for himself. And yet two years ago, Herb McLean decided to have reconstructive facial surgery.

Until 2001, McLean looked the way he felt. In the mirror he saw a healthy man who exercised regularly and watched his diet. Certainly he was aging.

Everyone ages, but his appearance matched his self-image, so plastic surgery never occurred to him.

In 2001, his mirror stopped matching the man inside. Overnight, it seemed, the skin under his chin began to sag "like a turkey gobbler neck." In his mirror, McLean saw someone 10 years older than the man inside.

BEFORE: Herb McLean, then 72, hated his "turkey neck." AFTER: McLean says he looks a decade younger. (Photos courtesy DR. ROBERT GRAY)

BEFORE: Pat Risner, 56, said her smile made her look grumpy. AFTER: Risner loves her new, happy smile. (Photos courtesy DR. ROBERT GRAY)

NEW SMILE: Pat Risner, 56, is a respiratory nurse at Dameron Hospital in Stockton. She was unhappy with her smile, so she had cosmetic surgery in January. (Record photo by STEVE BARKHURST)

"It didn't bother me," his wife said. "But the flesh under his chin near his Adam's apple hung down, and it bothered him, so I said he should go ahead and have it removed." Manteca cosmetic surgeon Dr. Robert F. Gray removed the excess skin in less than an hour and McLean was amazed at the outcome. "I'm a decade younger than the stereotype," he said, "and now I look it." Facial plastic surgery procedures have increased by 40 percent since 1997, according to an April study by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. That rate of increase is expected to go up during the next 20 years for several reasons. Advances in technology, more competition for jobs in a tight economy, increased longevity and

the maturing of the baby boom generation have made cosmetic surgery one of the fastest-growing segments of American medicine.

People older than 50 in the 21st century are mentally and physically healthier than preceding generations, said Modesto plastic surgeon Dr. Theodore Staahl. They're younger than outdated stereotypes, and they want to look it. They don't want to look 20 or 30, Staahl said, but looking a decade younger is a realistic goal.

"It pretty much comes down to this," McLean said. "We all get old. We all get saggy, and we all die. But if we have the option of becoming 10 years younger-looking, then why not? If we can afford it and (the result) matches how we feel inside, why not?" The 40 percent increase in plastic surgery procedures would be much higher if it weren't for insurance companies. Surgery to make yourself look like you feel inside simply isn't covered, and the rules are tighter than the space between your eyelids.

Upper eyelids are covered. Lower eyelids aren't.
Lower eyelids don't affect sight, insurance companies say.

Proponents of cosmetic surgery coverage for seniors see an inconsistency in the insurance position. If a senior is aging more rapidly on the outside than the person inside, weekly visits to psychiatrists are covered so they can adjust. But a one-hour operation by a cosmetic surgeon that eliminates the problem isn't. So far, the insurance lobby has successfully kept mental health separate from physical appearance. Cosmetic surgery is vanity, a luxury, they argue.

Pat Risner, 56, is a respiratory therapist at Stockton's Dameron Hospital. Her personality is outgoing. The fact that she can see humor in almost any situation makes patients and co-workers love her. She smiles all the time, she said, but until she had reconstructive surgery in May, no one knew she was smiling. "My lips turned down at the corners. So when I smiled I always looked grumpy," she said. "And grumpy is not how I am or how I feel. It's bothered me all my life." This spring, Risner found she had some extra money, enough to buy a new car and pay cash for it. When she found a car she liked and sat in the driver's seat, she checked the rear-view mirror. Risner smiled for the mirror, but the mirror said she was frowning. "I said to myself, 'My car looks better than my face.' " Right then, Risner decided to keep her old car and buy herself a smile. "When I was younger, my youth counteracted my bad smile, but as I got older, I could see people's negative reactions." It was discouraging, she said, even depressing. Risner has lots of medical contacts through the hospital, and her research led her to Dr. Gray in Manteca. "He's the only two-board-certified plastic surgeon in San Joaquin County, and after I checked him out, I made an appointment."

Gray always asks new patients why they want reconstructive surgery.

Risner said all she wanted was a smile that looked like a smile, and Gray said, "I can do that." For the first few days after the operation, Risner's face was swollen, and she was afraid she'd made a horrible mistake. "I said, 'Oh, Lord, what have I done?' My smile was humongous. It was more than a Martha Raye; it was Angelina Jolie times two," she said.

But when the swelling went down, the smile in her mirror fit the person inside for the first time in her life. "The operation cost \$16,000, but it was worth every penny," Risner says today. At work, she sees the difference.

New patients warm quickly to her sense of humor, something she had to work at before. Hospital co-workers had liked her just fine the way she was, said Dameron respiratory therapist Lola Malet. But the change in the way Risner feels about herself has other nurses in their 50s thinking about uplifting experiences for themselves.

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ON THE COVER: Since 2001 reconstructive surgery to remove a "turkey gobbler" neck, Herb McLean, 74, has agreed with what he sees in the mirror. "I'm physically and mentally a decade younger than the stereotype, and now I look it," he said, as he dried off from exercising in the pool of his Oakdale home. (Record photo by STEVE BARKHURST)