



22 AUG, 2022

Cosmetic cowboys disfigure hundreds

Age, Melbourne



Royal Australasian
College of Surgeons

Page 1 of 6

Cosmetic cowboys disfigure hundreds

EXCLUSIVE

Adele Ferguson

Hundreds of cosmetic surgery patients across Australia have been left disfigured, in constant pain and psychologically damaged by under-regulated doctors, according to a joint investigation by *The Age* and *60 Minutes*.

Documents obtained as part of the investigation into the \$1.4 billion industry expose serious failings in a sector that allows doctors with basic medical degrees and weekend courses to call themselves cosmetic surgeons.

Patients from major industry players such as Cosmos Clinic and Daniel Lanzer, and solo operators such as Sydney doctor Adam Najem, have approached *The Age*.

One of Najem's patients was admitted to Liverpool Hospital in Sydney with septic shock after a "Brazilian butt lift" and liposuction went wrong.

Najem is also accused of spying on another patient who complained about his work to try to disprove her injury claim. "I was left traumatised, depressed. It was the worst experience of my life," the patient said.

Another patient – 19-year-old Kate, who asked for her identity to be protected for privacy reasons – underwent liposuction with Najem in October 2020 and says she was left with burn marks on her abdomen.

"I was screaming, and he did not do anything," she said of the procedure.

Maddens Lawyers has filed a class action against Lanzer, with more than 540 people signed up. They are also considering action against Cosmos.

Some of the more shocking practices exposed in the investigation include nurses performing liposuction (which is illegal) and cosmetic surgery being performed during lockdown (which is a criminal offence).

A retired elite soldier has joined the Lanzer class action after undergoing gynecomastia surgery – or the reduction of "man boobs" – and liposuction of the abdomen in Brisbane by Dr Ryan Wells.

"He actually cut me to the groin," the soldier said. "I was thinking I

was going to die. I actually said ... 'Please don't kill me.'"

REPORT Pages 8-9



22 AUG, 2022

Cosmetic cowboys disfigure hundreds

Age, Melbourne

Royal Australasian
College of Surgeons

Page 2 of 6

Elite soldier feared for life after cosmetic surgeon cut him open

Investigations into a dangerously unregulated industry have prompted reports of further pain, writes **Adele Ferguson**.

It's the stuff of nightmares – a 24-year-old woman screaming in agony as a cosmetic surgeon uses scissors to cut a hole into her swollen, infected buttock after a Brazilian butt-lift went horribly wrong.

As the cries of pain get louder, the room fills with a foul smell of something like vomit and faeces from the open wound.

The cosmetic surgeon, Dr Adam Najem, gives the patient gauze to bite on to stifle her screams “as there are other patients in the waiting room”.

Her condition deteriorates over the next few days but Najem advises her against going to hospital, saying “no, it was all part of the procedure”.

On June 4, 2018, the woman's cousin calls an ambulance, and she is admitted to the intensive care unit of Sydney's Liverpool Hospital in septic shock – a life-threatening condition.

Najem runs a cosmetic clinic in Baulkham Hills, Sydney.

On his website, he describes himself as a reputable cosmetic surgeon who offers his patients “a high level of care”.

But documents obtained as part of a joint investigation by *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *60 Minutes* into the \$1.4 billion cosmetic surgery industry expose doctors such as Najem. They reveal multiple serious failings in a poorly regulated sector that allows doctors with basic medical degrees and weekend courses to call themselves cosmetic surgeons.

When things go wrong, it is left to public hospitals to pick up the pieces. Regulators are slow to act

and, when they do, it is often not nearly enough.

Like most cosmetic surgeons, Najem has a basic medical degree and limited surgical training. He boasts as his credentials a certificate from the European College of Aesthetic Medicine & Surgery. But a quick look reveals this is an organisation that offers short courses in cosmetic surgery, including facelifts, which take 15 hours; or liposuction, which can be learnt in a four-hour online course followed by a hands-on training session.

Over the past 10 months, this masthead has received hundreds of emails and calls from patients of cosmetic surgeons living with disfigurement and pain.

These include penis enlargements gone wrong, patients left in excruciating pain, two women who had facelifts by a Melbourne-based cosmetic surgeon who were left disfigured, with one saying “I look like a monster – and when I texted him for help, he said he is on leave”.

This flood of cases follows an exposé into the Daniel Lanzer Clinics last October which uncovered a litany of safety and hygiene issues.

In June, the same investigators revealed questionable conduct at the country's biggest cosmetic procedure network, Cosmos Clinic.

Ten months on, the casualties continue.

Their injuries come from big and small operators, who have been able to exploit gaping holes in the regulatory system to create a new kind of doctor-cum-entrepreneur,

driven by profits and brand, not patients' interests.

Some of the more shocking practices exposed in the latest investigation include nurses performing liposuction on patients (which is illegal), cosmetic surgeries being performed during lockdown (a criminal offence), nurses forging doctors' signatures on scripts or filling pre-signed scripts, doctors performing major surgeries in unregistered facilities (potentially illegal) and doctors doing major surgeries in non-dedicated spaces such as side-rooms and offices.

The investigation has trawled through thousands of leaked WhatsApp messages between doctors and nurses at the Daniel Lanzer network from 2019 to the end of 2021 and found evidence of damning behaviour.

Lanzer surrendered his medical registration last December, and some of the other doctors exposed by this masthead have had conditions imposed on them, but other doctors and nurses about whom multiple complaints have been received are still freely practising on patients.

Audio recordings confirm what people find out only when it is too late – that surgery is trivialised and recovery time is underplayed by doctors to improve their chances of getting more business.

A private recording sent by Lanzer to staff encourages them to lie to patients about the time it takes to recover from major cosmetic surgeries.

“As everyone knows we underplay recovery because



22 AUG, 2022

Cosmetic cowboys disfigure hundreds

Age, Melbourne



Royal Australasian
College of Surgeons

Page 3 of 6

people get scared,” Lanzer tells staff.

The recordings give an insight into a “whatever it takes” attitude in the quest for more patients.

In one internal message, Dr Daniel Aronov posts an image of Lady Gaga to a WhatsApp group of up to 65 nurses and doctors and says “is it wrong that all I can think about during my in-flight entertainment is how much I’d love to give Lady Gaga neck lipo?”

Lanzer replies “write to her. Free.”

Aronov fires back “how do I word it so it’s not outrageously offensive? Hey Lady Gaga. Big fan. Can I call you lady? Just wanted to talk to you about your double chin...”

Other disturbing behaviour includes a video taken of anaesthetist Terrence Palmer using an operating theatre as a performance space, not wearing a mask as he sings opera beside an unconscious patient undergoing liposuction by two Lanzer doctors. The video was recorded during lockdown in August 2020, which makes the cavalier attitude even worse.

The same doctor dances and laughs in an internal video as two cosmetic surgeons jig and sing to Dolly Parton’s *Jolene* as they thrust long stainless-steel cannulas into an unconscious male patient.

Palmer is not a specialist anaesthetist, which requires an extra five years’ training. He has a basic medical degree from the UK but administered general anaesthetics to patients.

When the NSW regulator, the Medical Council, launched an investigation shortly after being contacted by this masthead about his credentials, he surrendered his medical registration, which stopped the regulatory investigation in its tracks. It said should he return to practising, “it is highly likely he would be the subject of further council proceedings related to the above circumstances”.

Palmer told this masthead: “I have provided non-specialist anaesthetic services in both public and private institutions since 1986. I do not hold myself out as a specialist anaesthetist, nor do I market my services.”

Cosmetic surgery is a massive growth industry. Facelifts, tummy tucks, BBLs, liposuction and breast implants are estimated to be worth \$1.4 billion a year. Along with laser surgery, injectables and non-surgical fat reduction, Australians are forking out more than \$6 billion a year, with forecasts that will hit \$7.8 billion by 2024.

Hefty profit margins, low barriers to entry and deficient regulatory oversight have created a lucrative juggernaut, with estimates the sector has doubled in size in the past five years to reach 500,000 cosmetic procedures a year. Australia has become one of the biggest consumers of cosmetic surgery in the world on a per capita basis.

Nurses, dermal therapists and beauticians are signing up for weekend injector courses for a few thousand dollars. They pay an annual membership fee to get access to GPs who prescribe the drugs remotely. In untrained hands, Botox and cheek filler injections can cause blindness.

As one plastic surgeon said, “no one is stopping nurses from doing this in unsupervised, unhygienic premises”. He cited a necrotic calf wound caused by an unsupervised nurse in a salon doing sclerosant injections into leg veins.

“This is a very dangerous chemical usually used in selective areas by vascular surgeons.”

It took six months to heal and required multiple hospital admissions and left permanent scarring, he said.

Social media expert Michael Fraser thinks the problem is far bigger than the regulator realises. “We’re seeing cosmetic surgery centres popping up everywhere.

They’re going into shopping centres down the strip.”

LACK OF DATA HIDES EXTENT OF PROBLEM

The extent of botched surgeries is hard to quantify. There is no national data collection on cosmetic medical and surgical procedures, nor is there a central depository for botched surgeries or deaths.

Professor of surgery at Melbourne University Mark Ashton says he has a constant stream of people coming to see him for revision surgery.

“Every single week, I see three or four or five patients who have been maimed and harmed by people with limited or basic surgical training,” he said. “These people are seemingly just not interested in looking after the patient.”

Kathryn Emeny, a lawyer at Maddens Lawyers, is spearheading a class action into the Daniel Lanzer cosmetic surgery clinics. It was filed in the Victorian Supreme Court in March, and so far 540 patients have signed up, alleging Lanzer and some of his other doctors including Ryan Wells, Daniel Aronov, Daniel Darbyshire and Ali Fallahi engaged in negligence.

It also alleges cosmetic surgeries were not undertaken with an appropriate level of care and skill. The doctors are defending the claim. In previous statements, Lanzer has said he had thousands of happy patients and denied any wrongdoing.

Emeny says it is unprecedented to have such a high level of interest in a class action at a relatively early stage. The action came on the back of the “Cosmetic Cowboys” joint investigation by this masthead and *Four Corners* 10 months ago.



22 AUG, 2022

Cosmetic cowboys disfigure hundreds

Age, Melbourne



Royal Australasian
College of Surgeons

Page 4 of 6

Since that story aired, hundreds of emails and phone calls have poured in from patients sharing harrowing stories of surgery gone wrong. This masthead has seen photos, videos and medical records of botched abdomens, nipples missing, serious infections and lopsided faces.

Maddens has also launched an investigation into another big operator, Cosmos Clinics, following the investigation by this masthead and *60 Minutes* in June. So far, they have received 65 registrations of interest.

The June investigation was delayed by three weeks as the Cosmos founder Dr Joseph Ajaka rushed to court after receiving a series of questions before publication. The story was held up for three weeks, in which time two patients ended up in hospital in Sydney after serious infections post-surgery.

After the Court of Appeal threw out Ajaka's claim and the story appeared, he threatened to sue for defamation but did not go through with the threat.

At the time, Cosmos said in a statement that "patient safety informs everything that we do".

'I WAS THINKING I WAS GOING TO DIE'

An elite retired soldier who asked for his identity to be protected for security reasons has joined the Lanzer class action after undergoing gynecomastia, or reduction of breast issue, and liposuction of the abdomen in Brisbane by Dr Ryan Wells.

The military man said after the first surgery, his right nipple fell off. He says he was told nipples grow back – but it didn't.

Several months went by, and in March 2021, Wells suggested revision surgery of the patient's abdomen. This time, a nurse without supervision performed liposuction for up to 15 minutes, the soldier says, which is illegal. When Wells took over, he performed an abdominoplasty, or tummy tuck, cutting a 30-centimetre line from one side to

the other.

"Instead of using the liposuction on my abdomen, he actually cut me to the groin," the soldier said. "I didn't know that was going to happen."

He went home and started to bleed. When he went back the next morning, Wells told him he would

need to open him up again. "He said, 'I'm sorry but there might be some blood vessels that we need to cauterise that I've missed'."

The patient spent more than 10 hours in the clinic before he was operated on.

"I could feel myself losing thoughts and consciousness through the day with the amount of blood I'd lost," he says. "But they weren't letting on how bad it was.

"I was thinking I was going to die. I actually said before he cut me open that second time 'please don't kill me'. I remember Wells telling me that he was concerned about the level of blood loss but wouldn't call an ambulance because he didn't want other doctors 'messing up his work'."

The elite soldier had to be cut open again and was given a green whistle – an analgesic used to relieve pain. Its associated website says it is used by sports clubs, lifesavers and paramedics for situations where "fast-acting and uncomplicated relief is needed". An abdominoplasty does not fit that description.

After the surgery, Wells moved the soldier in a wheelchair to a motor inn. "I couldn't stand or urinate – it was a nightmare."

Emeny describes this level of aftercare as astounding. "An ambulance isn't called. He's checked in at a motor inn down the road and Wells books the room next door to stay overnight. It is the script of a horror movie.

"This is a patient who came in otherwise fit and healthy, and he left wheelchair bound and on orders to remain on bed rest for an indefinite period."

The elite soldier is still recovering. "You think the defence force treats you bad but ... this is

the next level," he says.

Wells was suspended in June this year, five weeks after *60 Minutes* uncovered shocking practices. After this, Wells told his patients: "The board has chosen to suspend me from practice whilst the investigation is ongoing. This will also allow me the time to put forward my response."

Margaret Faux, a health regulation expert who has worked in the industry for 40 years, says Wells' suspension should have happened the day after the *60 Minutes* aired in June.

"It took five weeks for AHPRA to say 'actually, we're going to suspend his registration because we've decided five weeks later he's a danger to the public. After that episode, they should have been making decisions the next day.'"

SPYING ON A PATIENT

For patients of poor cosmetic surgery, it is hard to find a suitable avenue when things go wrong. Facts are often buried by heavy-handed legal tactics such as sending unhappy patients threatening legal letters, writs or gag orders in return for refunds.

In the case of one of Najem's patients, Belinda (not her real name), a private detective was hired to spy on her, her family, friends and workplace.

Belinda had liposuction and a BBL she says left her in pain and scarred. She wrote to regulators, who did little, then posted a negative review online, which sparked legal threats and an offer of \$10,000 to remove the review.

A file was compiled of her movements over a three-week period in 2019, including photos of her mother in nightwear, her partner, references to where she ate, photos taken in an underground car park near her work and a visit to the supermarket. This surveillance was apparently to try to disprove her injury claim.



22 AUG, 2022

Cosmetic cowboys disfigure hundreds

Age, Melbourne



Royal Australasian
College of Surgeons

Page 5 of 6

“I was left traumatised, depressed. It was the worst experience of my life,” she says.

Another patient, 19-year-old Kate, who asked for her identity to be protected for privacy reasons, underwent liposuction with Najem in October 2020 and says she was left with major burn marks on her abdomen.

“I just felt like my skin was ripping. He was burning me. I was screaming, and he did not do anything,” she says of the procedure.

When she reported Najem to the regulator, he was informed of the complaint and refused to complete her aftercare.

“He received the complaint, and he basically kicked me out. He was like ‘I’m not taking care of you any more. How dare you write a complaint about me’.”

Najem has a history of patient complaints. Liverpool Hospital reported him to the Health Care Complaints Commission and the Medical Council of NSW after a 24-year-old patient arrived in septic shock in June 2018.

The hospital’s internal interview notes with the patient and internal correspondence include an email outlining key concerns. One of the worrying issues expressed in a June 2018 email between senior staff, “is that the patient was allegedly advised by Najem not to present to a hospital, but was in septic shock on arrival at Liverpool Hospital.”

Najem had conditions placed on his medical registration in 2019, including that he couldn’t do fat transfers except for 50 millilitres or less. Najem was contacted for comment but did not respond.

In February 2022, the regulator issued a new set of restrictions which included banning him from doing BBLs. It said he could not undertake procedures as the primary surgeon except liposuction procedures and procedures that could be done in an outpatient setting under local anaesthetic in consulting rooms.

For at least three patients, including Kate, Belinda who was spied on, and the 24-year-old who almost died from septic shock, and others, the regulator’s sanctions aren’t enough.

“I was only meant to get lipo, but he convinced me to get a BBL as he said my body would be out of proportion ... My body is still disproportionate, and I am in pain,” one says. “Where’s the justice?”

With Klaus Toft

‘Is it wrong that all I can think about during my inflight entertainment is how much I’d love to give Lady Gaga neck lipo?’

Dr Daniel Aronov



22 AUG, 2022

Cosmetic cowboys disfigure hundreds

Age, Melbourne



A retired soldier had a horrendous experience when he underwent cosmetic surgery, left in a wheelchair in a motor inn. Photo: 60 Minutes

COSMETIC COWBOYS

Shocking revelations about botched cosmetic surgery are the tip of the iceberg in a lucrative growth industry that is out of control.

THESE DOCTORS OPERATE WITH LITTLE OVERSIGHT

\$1.4b

is spent on cosmetic surgery a year in Australia.

\$6b

a year is spent if you include laser procedures, injectables and non-surgical fat reduction.

500k

estimate of cosmetic surgery procedures a year. There is a lack of official data.

100s

and possibly thousands of patients have been maimed, scared and permanently damaged by botched surgeries. Again, there is no official data.

540

patients have joined a class action against Dr Daniel Lanzer's cosmetic surgery clinics.

65

patients have contacted lawyers inquiring about a possible class action against Cosmos Clinics.

There is a confusing maze of state and federal regulators.

Different states have different rules about what is safe.



Victorian lawyer Kathryn Emery, from Maddens, is leading a class action of more than 540 patients claiming negligence against Dr Daniel Lanzer and a group of doctors working for him.



Dr Adam Najem

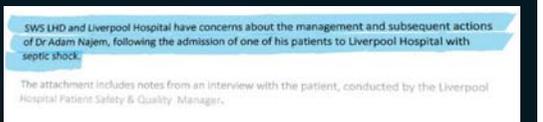
SPYING DOSSIER

Documents show how a private investigator was used by Dr Adam Najem to monitor one patient's movements. In one instance, the patient's mother (in blue) is seen answering a door.



CONCERNS EXPRESSED

An excerpt from an email expressing concerns held by the South Western Health District and Liverpool Hospital for a patient treated by Dr Najem.



MANY HANDS

Multiple scripts signed by different nurses in the name of Dr Daniel Lanzer.

