

Teen Quest for “Perfect Body” Can Be Deadly

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Staff Writer

(March 26, 2008) The tragic death of a Florida teen during breast implant surgery is calling attention to the growing trend among teens to undergo this and other risky procedures in order to achieve the “perfect body.”

For 18 year-old Stephanie Kuleba, a popular high school cheerleader, straight-A student and prospective pre-med freshman at the University of Florida, a Good Friday trip to a Boca Raton outpatient surgery unit for reconstructive breast surgery went terribly wrong.

Doctors had not quite gotten to the breast implantation stage of the surgery when Kuleba suffered a rare genetic reaction to general anesthesia. Known as malignant hyperthermia, it sent her body into shock. Paramedics were called and she was rushed to the nearby Delray Medical Center but it was too late. She died the next day.

Although the official cause of death has not yet been confirmed, family attorney Roberto D. Stanziale told *Fox News* there are some questions being raised about the way doctors responded to Kuleba’s condition.

However, “Her parents want me to make this abundantly clear,” he said. “This is not a witch hunt. Their primary goal is to find out what happened to their daughter and see if there is anything we can do to prevent this from happening to anybody else.”

It’s definitely a noble cause. The trend among teens to undergo cosmetic surgery has risen to alarming rates in recent years. According to statistics compiled by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 13,699 cosmetic procedures were performed on teens in 1996. In just 10 years later, that number had jumped to 244,124.

“I am seeing an increase in the number of teens who are undergoing elective cosmetic procedures,” said Jennifer Ashton, M.D. “It’s just another example of how teenagers are increasingly fixated on physical appearance with potentially dangerous consequences.”

She blames shows like “Extreme Makeover,” the explosion of the celebrity culture and the Internet.

However, there is plenty of blame to go around when it comes to this dangerous new trend, and not all of it lies with teens. Too many parents are willing to fund the costly procedures, which can run as high as \$7,000 for breast implants, which is way beyond the reach of most teens.

Dr. David Sarwer, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine’s Center for Human Appearance told *Hilary Magazine* that in the suburbs of big cities, “cosmetic surgery is a relatively common Sweet 16 or high school graduation gift.”

Dr. Douglas Senderoff of New York has seen the same thing, with parents paying for the procedure because “they thought it was important for their (child’s) well-being.”

Parents need to be aware that the cultural trend toward the sexualization of girls is something that needs to be countered, not indulged.

According to a 2007 study by the American Psychological Association, the constant presentation in the media of girls and women as “things” whose only value is their sexual appeal has been linked to a variety of problems from eating disorders and low self-esteem to depression.

“The consequences of the sexualization of girls in media today are very real and likely to be a negative influence on girls’ healthy development,” says Eileen L. Zurbriggen, Ph.D, chair of the APA Task Force and associate professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in a press release.

“We have ample evidence to conclude that sexualization has negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, and healthy sexual development.”

This extensive study found evidence that the over-emphasis of a woman’s physical appearance has a profound negative affect on her self-confidence, making her uncomfortable with her body, which leads to self-image problems as well as feelings of shame and anxiety.

“Given that so few women meet the dominant cultural standard for an attractive, sexy appearance, it is not surprising that a girl’s chronic comparison of her own body to this impossible cultural standard would result in feelings of inadequacy and shame,” the report found

“Frequent exposure to cultural beauty ideals via the media has been shown to be associated with higher rates of eating disorders. The incidence of anorexia nervosa among 10 to 19 year old girls during a 50 year period found that it paralleled changes in fashion and idealized body image.”

Paying for costly cosmetic surgery only perpetuates the problem. The APA recommends that parents “teach girls to value themselves for who they are, rather than how they look.”

There are also substantial physical risks to implant surgery that both parents and teens need to be made aware of.

One doctor, Susan Kolb, M.D., a plastic surgeon and holistic medicine specialist in Atlanta, experienced them first-hand when she had implant surgery in 1985. Years later, one of her implants began to leak silicone. She developed fibromyalgia and other immune-related disorders along with neurological disease. The 49 year old surgeon admits that a lot more research needs to be done on the safety of breast implants.

Cindy Fuchs-Morrissey was 18 when she received her first implants as a birthday present from her parents. At 35, she was on her third set of implants. Today, the now 46 year old mother of three

suffers from multiple sclerosis. She told *Hilary Magazine* that she believes her daughter's scleroderma, a systemic sclerosis, is linked to silicone crossing the placental barrier.

Kathy Keithley Johnston, 53, a registered nurse and executive director of Toxic Discovery Network in Columbia, Missouri, has endured so much pain and suffering from her implants she goes around to high schools and colleges speaking about the problem.

Unfortunately, all of these warnings come too late for Stephanie Kuleba. Today, as she is laid to rest, her silver pom-poms and cheerleader uniform are hanging on the fence at West Boca Raton High School, surrounded by flowers and notes of sorrow from her friends.

We can only hope that her tragic story will inspire other teens to think twice before following in her footsteps.

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