



the cheek of it!

Kevin Tan finds out about the beauty of high cheekbones and how to get cheeky from internationally renowned Singaporean plastic surgeon Dr. Woffles Wu.

Everyone who has done their homework on plastic surgery will probably be familiar with the more common and sought after procedures – double eyelids, nose jobs, breast augmentation and even a whole bevy of aesthetic lasers. There is, however, one surgical procedure that can, on its own, bring about an overall improvement that could make a person look happier, glamorously beautiful and most importantly, more youthful.



Dr. Waffles Wu says that those with flat cheekbones often have disharmonious features.

We speak of the cheekbones.

Under the hood, cheekbones function primarily as scaffolding and something for tissue to drape over.

Aesthetically, cheekbones have the purpose of adding volume to the

soft tissues of the mid-face and the cheeks. "Far from being a simple chunk of bone, its height or lack thereof is often the 'X' factor that separates an average face from a head-turner," says Singaporean plastic surgeon Dr. Waffles Wu. He emphasises that, "The cheekbones are a very, very important component of a beautiful face."

With a flat set of cheekbones, individuals can have a weak and fleshy appearance, often looking tired and somewhat older than they actually are. "Those with flat cheekbones often have disharmonious features, with a sunken, depressed mid-face, and also often appear unhappy and even look a little argumentative," comments Dr. Wu.

Some people compensate this by having naturally fleshier cheeks. This is useful when the individual is young – creating the same effect of having fuller cheeks even if they don't have adequately high cheekbones. Unfortunately, their appearance will worsen as they age as the soft tissues begin to sag and droop. "They don't seem to age as well as those who have high cheekbones (natural or not)," observes Dr. Wu.

Dr. Wu gives an example, "If you look at a picture of Farrah Fawcett when she was younger, you see that she was a pretty girl and a lot of her facial fullness was due to the firm, youthful, soft tissue of her cheeks." As she grew older, however, the soft tissues began to droop and sink due to the effects of gravity. That's when she began to visually age faster than the age listed on her driver's license – she didn't have the cheekbones to hold up her facial structure and mitigate her aging process.

On the other hand, someone with naturally high cheekbones enjoys the benefits of structural support well into old age. "An example of this is Audrey Hepburn or Sophia Loren. They both have great cheekbone structure and have aged very well," says Dr. Wu.

For a surgeon, this makes their work easier, especially when performing facelifts. "For us surgeons, when we do a facelift on someone with good cheekbones, we generally get much better results than on a patient with deficient cheekbones."



'S' curved line denoting an ideal set of cheekbones.

"FAR FROM BEING A SIMPLE CHUNK OF BONE, ITS HEIGHT OR LACK THEREOF IS OFTEN THE 'X' FACTOR THAT SEPARATES AN AVERAGE FACE FROM A HEAD-TURNER." – DR. WOFFLES WU, PLASTIC SURGEON, ON THE CHEEKBONES

THE IDEAL CHEEKBONE

Without exception, high cheekbones are equated to beauty. Flip through any magazine and every model within, regardless of ethnicity, possesses high cheekbones.

Interestingly enough, the concept of Asians 'Westernising' their faces by making their eyes bigger and noses higher is reversed when Caucasians desire higher cheekbones. "Asians have much better cheekbone structure than Caucasians. Caucasians who wish to achieve better cheekbones are actually 'Asianising' their face since having higher cheekbones is a characteristic of the Asian face," notes Dr. Wu.

"Having a set of high cheekbones does two things," says Dr. Wu. "It helps to highlight



Adding volume to cheeks with cheek implants.

the mid-face region which together with the chin point of the face, creates what I call the triangle of beauty." He elaborates further, "Combined with the chin, nicely shaped cheekbones give a wonderful, beautiful, three dimensionality to the face."

Unfortunately, achieving high cheekbones to attain this dimensionality is not just a case of simply propping up the cheeks. A number of factors have to be taken into account. While high cheekbones are unanimously equated with beauty, the trouble lies in finding a definition for the perfect set of cheekbones, since every person has a different underlying bone structure. "It is hard to define what an ideal set of cheekbones is – this is where the artistry and judgement of the surgeon comes in," says Dr. Wu.

Aesthetically speaking from a surgeon's perspective, "An ideal set of cheekbones should project laterally and outwards enough so that when you look at a face of a person from a three quarters view from either side, you should see an 'S' curved line," explains Dr. Wu.

"This 'S' curved line is known as the OGEE line," says Dr. Wu. He adds, "It is a term popularised in the aesthetic surgery field by Dr. William Little, but originally coined by renowned architect Frank Gehry." Dr. Wu explains, "According to Gehry, to really appreciate a building, one shouldn't see it from the front or the side but from a three quarter view. A beautiful building from that angle should make a person go 'Oh Gee!' hence the term OGEE." Dr. Wu adds that like a building, "a person's beauty cannot truly be appreciated from a side or front view."

Dr. Wu demonstrates this as he takes a picture from a fashion magazine. A close-

up of a blonde pouting beauty sits on the table, immortalised through print in a three quarter view forever gazing into some distant horizon. Taking a pen out, he shows where the OGEE line is. "As you can see, a person with ideal cheekbones has a 'S' curved line of sorts when seen from this view. The line projects as a convexity outwards over the cheekbone area and then there should be a slight inwards or concavity over the cheeks before curving out over the chin area." Plainly speaking, it resembles a gently curving 'S'.

GRAFTS, IMPLANTS AND FILLERS

In the early days of plastic surgery before the advent of more advanced silicone implants and safe dermal fillers, cheek aug-

mentation was a messy business as bone grafts were used. Dr. Wu comments, "Using bone grafts for cheek augmentation is complicated – it often involves splicing the cheekbones, adding bony wedges harvested from elsewhere in the body and using plates and screws to hold the bone in place. Not all plastic surgeons are trained in these craniofacial techniques."

A faster, more immediate option is the use of fillers. "A simpler technique involves

fillers are good but they must be used correctly. They have their fair share of problems and many doctors use them indiscriminately, creating unnecessary problems."

An intermediate, permanent option between fillers and bone grafts is the use of hard silicone cheek implants. Cheek implants are designed to fit over the original cheekbones to increase its projection and shape. The procedure requires light sedation and local anaesthesia. Once the patient's cheeks are anaesthetised, a surgeon has the choice of how he wants to create the pocket for the implant. "There are many ways to access the cheekbone, we can go through an orbital incision under the eye or create an intraoral (through the inside of the mouth) incision to the cheekbone. Once we reach it, we then scrape the tissue off the cheekbone to create a snug pocket for the implants," shares Dr. Wu.

Now comes the complicated part as it relies on a surgeon's artistic eye and appreciation for detail. "At this point, the surgeon will then place a variety of implants in succession until he finds one that matches the patient's profile and needs exactly." He adds that he normally does a three dimensional CAT (CT) scan of the patient's skull so that he has a good idea of the underlying bone structure and the symmetry of the face. This is a prudent measure, seeing as most people don't have

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the use of fillers," says Dr. Wu. "Fillers allow for a unique form of patient interaction and in a way, is more accurate because you can see immediate results and the patient is also able to tell you what they want while they hold a mirror and observe the procedure taking place," explains Dr. Wu.

Since the procedure is minimally invasive in nature, the patient only requires local anaesthesia in the cheeks during the procedure and remains awake throughout. It takes less than half an hour to conduct and the patient can go home immediately after, though there will be some swelling that will last for about a week or so before the final results are readily apparent.

Depending on the brand and type of filler used, results can last up to two years before requiring a top-up dose. While permanent fillers that last a lifetime do exist, Dr. Wu is against their use, "Permanent

exactly symmetrical features. Dr Wu explains the challenge, "Many people do not have a symmetrical face and therefore if you put identically sized, symmetrical implants in both the cheekbones, we end up enhancing the asymmetry of the face."

As such, Dr. Wu often uses a slightly different sized implant for each cheekbone to balance this – but this creates its own series of practical problems. "In an asymmetrical face you have to put in implants of slightly different size and shape to complement the asymmetry but this creates problems – you end up with two broken sets of implants as we've only used one from each pair." He adds, "What is the likelihood of another patient who wants the odd leftover pair?"

Nevertheless, Dr. Wu keeps a large stockpile on hand to cater for this. Once the implants have been placed, he stitches the incision and the patient goes home to



Adding volume to cheeks with injectable semi-permanent implants.

recover. The total time for the procedure itself takes about an hour and a half, with results evident in a week to 10 days after the swelling has subsided.

After this time, the patient normally comes back to get the stitches removed and for a final check-up to ensure that they're healing nicely. For best results, it is advised that patients adopt a poker face for the duration of the recovery period to avoid dislodging the implants. Naturally, comedies are off the list for the duration of the healing process.

RESULTS AND COSTS

Of the three options, bone grafts are understandably the least performed. Due to its complexity and downtime, bone grafts are not popular though there are people who still opt for it. "There are still people who go for that," notes Dr. Wu, "and there are some situations that call for it but the problem with this is that it needs a hospital set-up, you need to use drills and plates and there is a cost involved with that as well." He adds that, "I still do

that occasionally, but it depends on what the patient is looking for and sometimes, they are looking for a specific procedure while others like the feel of using their own tissue without the risk of rejection from an implant."

Other situations where a bone graft may be called for is if someone is having other facial procedures done at the same time. "If a patient is having concomitant facial surgery where some extra bone is being harvested and also happens to be a candidate for a bone graft, then we might as well do it since we're operating there anyway. But in a purely cosmetic situation, other options are preferred and bone grafts for cheek augmentation are becoming few and far between," explains Dr. Wu.

Cost-wise, a bone graft may set a patient back over S\$20,000 (RM45,612) and according to Dr. Wu, it does not necessarily promise better results over using fillers or implants.

AS A LONG-TERM SOLUTION THAT CAN VISUALLY REDUCE THE APPEARANCE OF AGING, CHEEK AUGMENTATION IS ARGUABLY ONE OF THE BEST PROCEDURES A PATIENT CAN OPT FOR.

For their permanent results and relatively short downtime compared to a bone graft, silicone cheek implants represent an excellent long-term solution. The critical issue is selecting a surgeon who not only has the skill, but an existing stockpile of implants for use. "Choosing cheekbone

implants is a very specialised skill and a patient should really go to somebody who is very experienced and is known for sound aesthetic judgement."

He adds, "An inappropriate implant inserted may make you look Mongoloid and by the same token an implant of inappropriate size can make you look very bizarre." He emphasises that, "It's not a cheap operation to perform and having to redo it incurs an additional cost for both patient and surgeon in materials, time and inconvenience." Silicone cheek implants normally cost about S\$11,000 (RM25,088).

Fillers are the fastest solution with the most immediate results. However, this may not be an appropriate option for those with really flat cheekbones as they may require a lot more filler than normally necessary. According to Dr. Wu, prices vary based on the skill of the surgeon as well as the type and amount of filler used. "Some fillers are expensive and you need to use a lot for a cheek augmentation," he

states. He estimates the cost to run anywhere from S\$1,500 (RM3,421) upwards. "If the required volume is greater than four to six vials of fillers then it may be better to use the patient's own fat instead. This is a technique known as autologous fat transfer."

Because the procedure uses the patient's own tissue, there is no risk of rejection. Transplanted fat, however, may not take and can end up being reabsorbed by the body or worse, may grow with time creating unwanted fullness. An experienced plastic surgeon can act to minimise these potential complications.

Dr. Wu says, "An autologous fat transfer must be performed by a trained plastic surgeon as it also has some problems and side effects such as significant swelling. This will be explained by the surgeon to the patient before the procedure."

As a long-term solution that can visually reduce the appearance of aging, cheek augmentation is arguably one of the best procedures a patient can opt for. In terms of which type, the choice is ultimately up to the patient and how much they're willing to pay, how much downtime they're willing to put up with and to a lesser extent, what results they're willing to accept given what they started out with.

