



## Pain Management in Aesthetic Medicine

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**We have to be careful that our educational efforts do not lead us into producing not surgeons but technicians selling their skills in the market place.**

**We are physicians primarily, surgeons by choice and plastic surgeons for the joy of living...The prime purpose of the medical profession is to give trustworthy service of the highest quality in matters of health**

Any aesthetic procedure in which the skin is penetrated or modified is potentially painful, but individual patients vary enormously in how they perceive the sensation and how much it bothers them. It is well known that anxiety and fear play a huge role in elective as well as unplanned medical procedures. This is particularly true for facial aesthetic treatments; our sense of self is intimately related to our facial appearance and expectations of what may go wrong can play a major role in pain perception. I would say that patients attach more psychological pain to not having what they want corrected, enhanced or fixed, than to the physical pain that they fear may be caused by the procedure. Managing pain is just as much about managing expectations and perceptions as it is about using a pharmacological approach to limit the nerve impulses generated by pain receptors. Today's aesthetic professionals must create a clinic environment and an experience that minimises the fear of pain, as well as dealing effectively with any physical pain that ensues.

### First impressions are crucial

Health professionals who deliver potentially uncomfortable aesthetic procedures on a daily basis agree that the opportunity to minimise pain starts at the initial consultation. I observe and understand if this is an anxious patient or has this patient had a bad experience? Does he or she seem to have a low pain threshold? Is this patient showing signs of body dysmorphic disorder? Past experiences play a huge role in how a patient perceives any type of treatment, and taking a detailed history from each patient to identify any concerns is therefore essential. You really have to understand the patient's needs and concerns about pain, their attitude to needles, and then plan accordingly.

### Addressing the issue

To fulfill the requirements of informed consent, the amount of pain that a patient can expect during an aesthetic procedure has to be discussed but, you have to be careful; if you ask people about pain before you start, you will set them up for pain. There is a fine line between not giving enough information, and giving too much. If you don't explain every step of what is going to happen in a procedure – such as a chemical peel – and suddenly the patient feels burning or stinging, he or she will naturally assume something is going wrong. They need to be prepared, but you don't say, "This will be very painful". You have to be wise in the choice of words you use.

### A bespoke and holistic approach

Creating the right atmosphere in your aesthetic clinic is paramount. Experienced aesthetic practitioners aim to create a welcoming, relaxing ambience in their clinics, as far removed from a traditional 'hospital' atmosphere as possible, to help decrease stress and dissipate anxiety. Straight away patients are de-stressed by looking out onto the gardens, rather than thinking about their treatment. Having the radio on works too, because they can listen to it and comment on it. Making sure people don't feel rushed is also a priority. During a consultation, the patient is the most important person in the world to you at that moment, that's what they need to believe, you need to have a nice calm voice and exude confidence. Avoid wearing scrubs, or a suit and tie, and preferring to meet patients wearing semi-casual, everyday clothes is something new patients will not expect – and almost immediately I get a non medical conversation going to get to know the patient better as a person. At every stage, managing pain means dealing with anxiety. When your client is calm, collected and relaxed, any actual pain will be minimized.

### Engaging all the senses

Many techniques can be used within the context of a holistic approach to distract the patient from any discomfort. Together, they form a strategy that fits into the holistic approach, complementing and supporting pharmacological pain relief. Deploy a five-pronged approach to managing pain for the patient, addressing all the senses to ensure that the patient is calm and relaxed.

#### Sight

An aesthetic procedure needs to take place in an environment that is clean, clear and calm.

#### Hearing

It's easy to enable every patient to listen to the music they want during a treatment. Talkesthesia, distracting the patient using conversation, is also a useful therapy.

#### Smell

A scented candle in the treatment room and offering each patient a warm scented towellette on arrival provides a calming, soothing, relaxing scent, and it sets the tone for the whole experience.

#### Taste

It's good that patients have something before they leave that is going to make them feel good and lift their spirits. Sweet treats also deliver a surge in serotonin and raise blood sugar, and this also means they are much less likely to faint.

## Touch

Hand massages during facial treatment offer a pleasant distraction, but there are many other options. During facial injection procedures, having an assistant tap in the middle of the patient's forehead, lightly but repetitively as a distraction, helps to relieve stress and minimize pain.

## Pharmalogical pain relief

Traditional pain relief has an important role to play in enhancing patient comfort during and after aesthetic procedures, but it should be treated as a well-integrated part of making each patient feel

calm, relaxed and cared for. Today, aesthetic clinics are able to offer the latest pain relief delivery technology as well as the range and formulation of active compounds available. Creams such as EMLA (lidocaine plus prilocaine), LMX4 (lidocaine) and Pliaglis (lidocaine and tetracaine), are used by many practitioners. EMLA and LMX4 take about an hour to take effect and they need to be occluded, which means wrapping the face in film. The nice thing about Pliaglis is that it is effective in 30 minutes and it self-occludes. It just peels off when it's dry, so it's easy to put on and easy to take off. The general consensus is that having a separate room for patients to sit privately once the cream has been applied is essential to the patient's overall experience. The other advantage is that when the area is completely numb, you can really concentrate on getting the result right, rather than simultaneously working hard to allay a patient's anxiety and fear because they are feeling some discomfort. For patients particularly susceptible to the initial pain of any injection, using Coolsense, a small device with a metal cartridge that is kept in a freezer and then applied to the skin for four seconds, gives 10 minutes of instant numbness. Coolsense works the same way as ice, but ice can get messy with water dripping all over the face once it melts.

## Treatment techniques to decrease discomfort

When delivering injectable therapies such as botulinum toxin or dermal fillers, good technique and the use of supportive therapies can help minimise discomfort. For filler injections, it is important to think about the volume being delivered. The evidence shows that the greater the volume of product injected, the greater the displacement of tissue and the greater the pain level. We try to use products with small volumes to give the best results. Splitting a larger dermal filler volume into two sessions a couple of weeks apart can also reduce pain. Using a cannula rather than a needle to introduce dermal fillers means only 1-2 pin pricks on each side of the face rather than several, which reduces pain significantly. Cannula injections are better tolerated than those administered with a needle. Interestingly, the bigger the cannula, the less painful it is.

## Invasive procedures

Intravenous sedation is available in an aesthetic clinic, at a level similar to that used before a colonoscopy. It essentially makes the patient feel very relaxed during the procedure and then dims their memories of it afterwards. Hilotherapy is beneficial for filler treatments, particularly facial voluminising, fractional laser treatments, laser lifting, mid to deep chemical peels and all facial surgery such as blepharoplasty and minifacelift. Water at the required temperature is passed through a mask or cuff that is applied directly to the skin, providing the optimal temperature for healing. The technique minimises swelling, bruising and pain after a procedure, which is just as important for patient experience as managing their comfort during that procedure.

## Pain management for 2014 and beyond

With so many approaches, techniques and pain relief formulations available in aesthetics, clinics need to keep their protocols under constant review. The best practitioners operate a feedback system with patients, learning from individual experiences, adapting how to tailor future experiences. We have enough tools available to us that patients should come in looking forward to the treatment they are having. The old saying, 'No pain, no gain' should not have a place in aesthetics in 2014.