New Straits Times - 14 September 2006 Malaysians are willing to go to great lengths to look beautiful. The demand has caused an explosion in the number of slimming centres and beauty salons. Malaysians, it seems, want to look beautiful and slim, never mind the method or the legitimacy of the "beauty professional". CHOK SUAT LING, NURRIS ISHAK and RINA DE SILVA lost some weight and gained a tan trying to check out the craze ON a weekday morning, at a beauty salon in a quiet corner of a Kuala Lumpur shopping mall, girls in crisp doctor-like uniforms are zipping about their duties.

Their job: Erase facial blemishes with a high-tech gadget not out of place in a science-fiction movie.

Could there be side-effects? Is the method safe?

As long as they can have baby-smooth skin like the photo-shopped models in fashion magazines, these concerns are furthest from the minds of customers relaxing to piped-in tunes and the scent of lavender oil.

Proof of this was the salon's long line of clients. It may be easier to fix an appointment to see the Prime Minister than to get a weekend slot.

To say plastic surgeons, slimming centres, therapists and beauticians are doing brisk business is an understatement.

And many are eager for a slice of the cake. At any shopping complex in the city, there will at least be three beauty salons offering anything from facials to slimming procedures.

For many women, and some men, a short visit and several thousand ringgit is a small price to pay to regain a little bit of their youth.

Some Muslims have even declared that the recent ruling by the National Fatwa Council will not stop them from getting their Botox fix.

The council ruled on July 27 that Muslims are forbidden to use Botox – which has prohibited substances – for cosmetic purposes.

The trend of putting beauty before health is disquieting, say various groups.

Not much has changed since stewardess Jenny Liew died of an apparently bungled nose job two years ago. The public urged health authorities to wield some kind of control over beauty treatments offered by non-medical practitioners. But the misadventures continue and people appear to remain blissfully unconcerned.

Reports abound of pain and disfigurement after breast augmentation surgery, intense swelling after double-eyelid surgery, facial paralysis following a Botox fix and other horrors.

There have also been cases of adverse side-effects – suicidal thoughts and depression – following the consumption of slimming pills, and violent reaction to products sold by uncertified beauty therapists.

The National Consumer Claims Tribunal last year received more than 200 complaints on beauty treatments that went wrong. Most cases involved skin damage after treatment at salons. Tribunal manager Darshan Singh said the numbers increase every year.

"It's a big industry. Some of the complainants came to us after using whitening products that caused severe swelling and rashes. They had to be hospitalised.

"Asked why they used the product, the answer was so that they could be fairer and therefore, more employable."

Magdalene Li's (not her real name) problems lie in another area – how to regain her pre-pregnancy silhouette. She has spent more than RM15,000 on slimming treatments. The well-paid lawyer may not mind forking out the equivalent of several months' wages for many people, but how does she know the treatment is safe?

"I figured since many others have done this, it should be all right."

But what is scary, she said, was the fact that slimming belts using electrical currents to "zap" fatty cells could now even be found in the neighbourhood night market.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Datuk Dr Teoh Siang Chin is disappointed with the lack of urgency in regulating the beauty industry.

"Despite many tragedies, it is regrettable that action by the health authorities has been slow in coming," he said. Many MMA members have reported an increase in patients suffering from botched

beauty procedures. These cases are not reported and land up in doctors' clinics for treatment and repair.

The Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Act 1998 and its Regulations 2006 only determine the rules for registered medical practitioners, said Dr Teoh, while "all sorts of interventions of questionable value and even some harmful ones are being advertised, administered and hidden from safe monitoring" by the beauty industry.

"Qualified plastic surgeons, for instance, take between four and eight years after their basic medical degree to complete their training and are subject to strict ethical and professional codes and standards."

Plastic surgeon Dr R. Angamuthu surmised that for every procedure performed by a legitimate surgeon, more than 10 would be conducted by fly-by-night practitioners.

He advised those seeking surgery to check with the Malaysian Association of Plastic, Aesthetic and Craniomaxillofacial Surgeons (MAPACS) for a list of registered doctors.

Quacks are usually from China and Taiwan, the surgeon claimed, and are recruited by beauty salons. "Among the common procedures offered are double eyelids and nose jobs, breast augmentation and lipo-suction," said the former MAPACS president.

He noted that people are taken in by such quacks due to the aggressive advertising and marketing strategies employed. Unrealistic results are often promised with no mention of complications.

"Quacks usually work with beauty centres who convince their clients to undergo the procedures.

Dr Teoh recommended that owners and tenants of beauty salons with dubious credentials be given drastic penalties such as imprisonment.

The authorities should come down hard on those who take out advertisements promising unrealistic results, agreed Prof Dr Chiam Heng Keng.

The social psychologist pointed out that there are now no laws against misinformation.

"The rights of consumers are not well protected. Many advertisements on beauty treatments are intended to mislead consumers," noted the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) commissioner.

Chiam felt the media should take the lion's share of the blame for encouraging the obsession with youth and beauty.

Associate Prof Dr Haliza Mohd Riji, who is head of the Universiti Putra Malaysia department of community health's unit of health promotion, said television, as the dominant form of mass media, should provide more balanced views on beauty and health as well as publicising the potential health risks of beauty products and procedures.

"Women should develop a more enlightened understanding of beauty and health and resist advertisements designed solely to stimulate the consumption of products," she said in her paper published in the current issue of the Malaysian Family Physician journal.

"To become discerning users of information, they need to be able to identify advertisements that sometimes camouflage as public education."

But for now, this message is lost on the many customers of the beauty salon.

They sit patiently in the comfortable waiting area for their turn at the procedure which promises porcelain skin, at a "not-to-be-missed" introductory rate of only RM128.

