

FUTURE

perfect

IN A WORLD OBSESSED WITH APPEARANCE, WHERE ARE WE HEADING WHEN IT COMES TO AGEING AND BEAUTY? A PLASTIC SURGEON, ETHICIST, AD MAN AND POLITICIAN DISCUSS THE ISSUE WITH BROADCASTER **Libbi Gorr**.

LIBBI GORR: Howard, when you walked in, I thought, "Is he checking me out to see what needs doing?"

HOWARD WEBSTER: The answer is no. I mean, why would I? No more than a plumber would check the plumbing at a house he was having dinner at.

RUSSEL HOWCROFT: Oh, they do.

WEBSTER: I mean, you could do a bit [of plastic surgery] on everybody, that's the reality of it. But no ... well, maybe Russel.

GORR: Is beauty the ultimate sales pitch?

HOWCROFT: There is nothing new about beauty being aspirational; that's been going on as long as we've walked on earth. But does advertising use that to sell? Yes.

LESLIE CANNOLD: Even with experiments with babies, they discovered babies can tell who is beautiful and who isn't. There is something universal about beauty. We are all born to respond to it in a positive way.

HOWCROFT: So beauty isn't in the eye of the beholder!

GORR: And the feminist ethos of being judged for who you are, that goes against the forces of nature?

CANNOLD: The feminist idea is about saying it shouldn't be any different for women than men. Soon, thanks to advertisers, we won't be. Initially, it was women who were told something's wrong with your hair, your skin, your body – because only when something's wrong with us can we be sold stuff. Now advertisers realise men are just as fertile ground.

HOWCROFT: That's very true. "Because you're worth it" is now articulated by men in advertising.

GORR: Kate Ellis, as someone who is described as a natural beauty, how has that affected your life?

KATE ELLIS: When people talk about me, there are three important words at the end of the sentence,

"She's not bad looking ... for a politician." Speaking generally, though, there's stereotyping as well as advantages that come with a person being attractive.

WEBSTER: I agree. For men and women who are beautiful, it is harder to make their lives stick.

GORR: So great beauty can be a curse?

WEBSTER: Yeah. One of the most beautiful women I have ever met was doing a PhD in biochemistry at Oxford. But it diminished her career as a scientist; she had a credibility problem because of her appearance.

CANNOLD: Because pretty women must be dumb?

ELLIS: Right. But the truth is that looks are only ever going to get you so far. Your looks are going to fade.

GORR: Unless they visit Howard. What decides beauty, Howard? Is it mathematical equations or your eye?

WEBSTER: Most studies talk about averages – formulas around nose height and length, cheekbone prominence – everybody's rib cage is slightly different but breasts will look best at a certain level. There have been studies about what makes people very attractive. They tend to have eyes that are wider spaced, be taller, thinner. They are not the average, that's what's interesting. Average is not beautiful. Average is average.

GORR: Howard, how do you respond to people who say you, as a plastic surgeon, are the problem?

WEBSTER: There are people who shouldn't be having surgery. There are people who shouldn't be providing it. You can only be the best doctor you can. So you never sell an operation off the rack. You have to ask, "Why now?" People often seek advice when they are distressed – a relationship break-up, when people turn 50, marital stress, loneliness, job insecurity, financial stress. Here's a good one – the day people wake up and see one of their parents in their face.

CANNOLD: Ageing is a big one for women. Men age, and they may not like what it does, but they realise there are other reasons people are still attracted to them – money, status. But because women end up less often with those things, they are more likely to focus on their looks and think, "I cannot afford to lose this power now. Because it's the only one I've got."

'ISN'T THE REAL PROBLEM, IF PLASTIC SURGERY IS BECOMING MORE MAINSTREAM, THAT IF YOU HAVE NORMAL BREASTS YOU'RE THE UNUSUAL ONE?'

– Kate Ellis, politician

HOWCROFT: There is nothing more powerful.

GORR: Are women who have had surgery attractive?

HOWCROFT: I don't think I know any women who have had cosmetic surgery.

GORR: That means they went to someone good! What about you? Would you have something done?

HOWCROFT: I don't think that's me, but I understand people who do – for bags under the eyes or jowls.

In some instances they do it for commercial reasons, because as time goes on in business, ageism does come into it. There are not too many 55-year-old advertising people about, so in 10 years' time I might be saying, "Can I please start looking 45 again?"

ELLIS: I'd never say never, but it's not likely to be at the top of my list of concerns. My priorities are not quite that inward-looking.

GORR: You are young. Does this only seem viable when you can see it?

WEBSTER: Very true. If you don't see the problem you don't think you'll ever have it. But the vast majority of our generation will have something done.

ELLIS: It's about where you draw the line. I get my hair done and I wear make-up, but where do you say enough's enough?

CANNOLD: The line moves. All of this is just a gradation. When I decided I would use Botox to stop the big furrow in my brow, to me it seemed a difference of degree. But a lot of people felt I crossed over from being a feminist to the devil's spawn.

WEBSTER: The stigma of cosmetic surgery has disappeared because of one thing and one thing only – TV makeover shows. They have changed attitudes from complete secrecy to patients coming in and saying, "All my girlfriends made me come."

ELLIS: Isn't the real problem, if surgery is becoming more mainstream, that if you have normal breasts, you're the unusual one? That's what terrifies me.

CANNOLD: That's the newsreader syndrome, isn't it? Most of them have had stuff to be on TV.

WEBSTER: Correct. In a practice such as mine, what you will see are the patients who have always been there, patients who are ageing and don't like it. Or people who have a feature that is not to their taste, like a big nose. And there is a new group that's growing – instead of coming in with a problem that's a medical consultation, they come to make a purchase, a decision to buy a new part of themselves.

HOWCROFT: Can I have a six-pack now, please?

WEBSTER: I have young women with perfect breasts come in seeking a breast augmentation – they have never seen un-augmented breasts in their lives. I ask patients to bring in pictures of what they like and they all bring in magazines where every one of the pictures is a person with breast implants.

GORR: Do you do the surgery?

WEBSTER: You don't sell them the operation easily. I have done it; I'm not precious about saying that.

GORR: Do you have moral or ethical concerns?

WEBSTER: I have concerns about the expectations of the patient, because they are not realistic. This is their version of normal – perfect breasts that they think are droopy. Because they've never seen a normal breast.

CANNOLD: Have they never been to a gym locker room?

ELLIS: What about their mothers?

WEBSTER: They are 16 to 25 and they often have their mothers with them.



Joining broadcaster Libbi Gorr on our panel are ...



THE AD MAN
Russel Howcroft
Chairman and managing director of advertising agency George Patterson Y&R and panellist on ABC



1's *The Gruen Transfer*.
THE ETHICIST
Dr Leslie Cannold
A bioethicist, researcher, writer, commentator and honorary fellow at the school of philosophy, anthropology and social inquiry at the University



of Melbourne.
THE POLITICIAN
Kate Ellis
Federal Minister for Youth and Sport and last year voted "sexiest politician" in a survey



of her fellow polities.
THE PLASTIC SURGEON
Howard Webster
A Melbourne-based plastic surgeon and a former president of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons.

'WHEN I DECIDED I WOULD USE BOTOX, A LOT OF PEOPLE FELT I'D CROSSED OVER FROM BEING A FEMINIST TO THE DEVIL'S SPAWN.'

– Dr Leslie Cannold, ethicist

ELLIS: The issue is not whether you do the surgery. The issue is how are we creating these sorts of pressures on a whole chunk of a generation?

HOWCROFT: What's important is for people to understand what advertising is. I have always felt advertising is the honest end of business because its purpose is clear: "Hello, I'm an ad. This is what I make, this is what I do. I want you to buy me."

ELLIS: This is why the Government is putting together the body image advisory group. We need to promote media literacy – understanding that what people see on television, read about in magazines may not be realistic portraits.

CANNOLD: Will this panel recommend regulations to the magazine industry? I can't imagine photos will have a disclaimer: "This model's breasts aren't real."

CANNOLD: Ultimately, this is all about informed consent. Up to the age of 11 or 12 kids are not developmentally able to discern truth from advertising, anyway.

WEBSTER: The advertising and marketing industry sells to them in massive amounts, which has never been done before. These kids are immature, vulnerable.

ELLIS: We should never underestimate how many of these messages are picked up inadvertently in the home. When a mum remonstrates with herself in the mirror, "I'm not going; I'm too fat," the kids see that.

CANNOLD: I know a woman who was preparing dinner one night when her five-year-old said, "Mummy, how old do I have to be before I stop eating?"

HOWCROFT: And, of course, we have the other end of this debate – obesity. That's not a good thing.

CANNOLD: So, on the one hand, we want to send the message to feel good about ourselves regardless of how we look – that what matters is what's inside – but there is this other element, that looks do matter.

WEBSTER: There's a vast difference between attractiveness and beauty. Some of the most attractive people are by no means beautiful and some of the most beautiful people are by no means attractive. Attractiveness is a package.

HOWCROFT: Part of attractiveness is talent, capability and presence, and the ability to be articulate. It's not how you look when you walk in the room; there's all sorts of stuff that comes into it, and that's powerful. As I said, there's nothing more powerful. ●