

A cut above

Plastic surgery is an evolving business, and one that's big in Destin



NICK TOMECEK | Daily News

Dr. William Burden meets with a patient recently in his office at the Destin Plastic Surgery Center.

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In a swimming-in-swimsuits community like Northwest Florida, residents and visitors get plenty of opportunities to both scrutinize their own images and contemplate fixing the pieces they don't like.

And while plastic surgery is a solution that can strike naysayers as extravagant, it's a solution that more and more people are choosing as it becomes prevalent and affordable.

"No one needs cosmetic surgery, but there's a lot of things we don't need," said Dr. William Burden, a surgeon at Destin Plastic Surgery. "If looking a little better's a desirable thing for you, twenty or thirty years ago you couldn't do anything about it. Now you can.

"And it's become more affordable," he said. "Now you can put it on a credit card, pay it off in a year and you're done."

So just how much does a tummy tuck cost? How about breast implants? Not as much in Destin as it would in other parts of the country,

Burden said.

A breast augmentation that would cost \$6,000 in Atlanta would run about \$4,300 here. Likewise, a tummy tuck that would be \$6,000 somewhere else is \$4,000 here — although expenses always depend on the patient and the time it takes to complete their procedure, Burden said.

"You have to pay more to pay your overhead elsewhere," Burden said, explaining why surgeries are cheaper in Northwest Florida. "It's just that way. Wages here are less — you can't charge as much.

"And there's probably a lot of competition — there's a lot of plastic surgeons in the Panhandle," he said. "In this area you take your shirt off a lot. If we lived in North Dakota, we probably wouldn't be doing so much liposuction."

Many of the patients at Destin Plastic Surgery are only part-time beachgoers, however. About 50 percent live year-round locally; the other half are from the larger Panhandle area or they live primarily in Birmingham or Atlanta but own second homes here.

"We do have some that come specifically for us and they get a hotel or

a condo for a week here; that's maybe the smaller percentage," Burden said.

"Destin is starting to become a very recognizable name. It used to be if I went to a national meeting they'd look at my nametag and see Destin and they'd say, 'Oh Florida — how close is that to Miami?' They know where you are now."

A lot has changed for Burden since he started operating locally in October 1995. Two weeks after he moved here, Hurricane Opal hit, and he did a lot of reconstructive work for people who cut ears or smashed fingers during recovery efforts.

Women who were pleased with the work Burden did on their husband's fingers would come to him for an eyelid surgery or liposuction. Eventually, his business moved from the reconstructive toward the cosmetic. But the industry has changed, too. Burden used to do a breast reconstruction each week for cancer patients. Now, he does two such reconstructions a year — a testament to improved cancer care.

Furthermore, air bags have reduced injuries, as have improved workplace safety procedures.

But as cosmetic work in those areas has declined, it has picked up in a big new area: gastric bypass patients who have excess skin to shed.

"That's probably the newest patient to arrive on the block," Burden said.

His typical patient?

"A 35- to 45-year-old mother of two. That's probably the most frequent patient I see," he said.

The women generally want to look better, he said, and seek a wide range of procedures from body contouring to facelifts. Men aren't so concerned about their face, he said, but they may want liposuction to get rid of stubborn areas they've had since they were teens.

"In a year, I might count five narcissistic people," he said, adding his patients are "very normal. They look in the mirror and they think, 'This is bugging me.'"

And how do they feel when the surgery is done?

"What they see is, 'Now I feel comfortable in my clothes.' And as far as the faces? 'I just don't look old and tired.' And it's not old, it's the tired. When you look like you haven't had good sleep in two months."