

THE NEW YORKER THE TALK OF THE TOWN

CHEST OUT, STOMACH IN ALL THAT YOU CAN BE

by Karen Schaler

Issue of 2004-07-26

Posted 2004-07-19

There has been a great deal of speculation recently that the government might reinstate the draft at some point, in order to replenish the nation's armed forces. Military and government officials have, for the most part, dismissed such talk. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said in an interview the other day, "We're perfectly capable of increasing the incentives and the inducements to attract people into the armed services." For years, the military has offered its recruits free tuition, specialized training, and a host of other benefits to compensate for the tremendous sacrifices they are called upon to make. Lately, many of them have been taking advantage of another perk: free cosmetic surgery.

"Anyone wearing a uniform is eligible," Dr. Bob Lyons, the chief of plastic surgery at Brooke Army Medical Center, said recently, in his office in San Antonio. It is true: personnel in all four branches of the military and members of their immediate families can get face-lifts, nose jobs, breast enlargements, liposuction, or any other kind of elective cosmetic alteration, at taxpayer expense. (For breast enlargements, patients must supply their own implants.) There is no limit on the number of cosmetic surgeries one soldier can have, although, Lyons said, "we don't do extreme makeovers in the military." The commanding officer has to approve the time off for any soldier who is having surgery. For most procedures, there's at least a ten-day recovery period, and while soldiers are recuperating they're on paid medical leave rather than vacation.

A Defense Department spokeswoman confirmed the existence of the plastic-surgery benefit. According to the Army, between 2000 and 2003 its doctors performed four hundred and ninety-six breast enlargements and a thousand three hundred and sixty-one liposuction surgeries on soldiers and their dependents. In the first three months of 2004, it performed sixty breast enhancements and two hundred and thirty-one liposuctions.

Mario Moncada, an Army private who was recently treated for losing the vision in one eye in Iraq, said that he knows several female soldiers who have received free breast enlargements: "We're out there risking our lives. We deserve benefits like that."

Janis Garcia, a former lieutenant commander and JAG attorney in the Navy, who is married to a retired Navy fighter pilot, says she grew up hating the way she looked. "I wouldn't even smile in my own wedding pictures." She checked in to the Naval Medical Center in San Diego for a nose job, a chin realignment, and a jaw reconstruction, free of charge. She also had her teeth straightened. "It changed my appearance drastically, and I became a more confident person," she said. "It literally changed the direction of my life." The doctors told her the work she had done would have cost her

nearly a hundred thousand dollars.

It is hard to begrudge young servicemen and women access to free medical care or quick self-improvement, considering the acts of heroism they perform every day. Nonetheless, some taxpayers and members of the armed forces may feel that there are better uses for the nation's resources.

"I'm appalled the military would support liposuction," Bill Fay, a captain in the Arizona Army National Guard, who is now serving in Nasiriyah, wrote in an e-mail. "This is a purely functional organization that does not exist for their livelihood or enjoyment."

The Army's rationale is that, as a spokeswoman said, "the surgeons have to have someone to practice on." "The benefit of offering elective cosmetic surgery to soldiers is more for the surgeon than for the patient," Lyons said. "If there's a happy soldier or sailor at the end of that operation, that's an added benefit, but that's not the reason we do it. We do it to maintain our skills"—skills that are critical, he added, when it comes to doing reconstructive surgery on soldiers who have been wounded.

Some plastic surgeons question this logic. Dr. Shaun Parson, a prominent cosmetic surgeon in Arizona, says that cosmetic surgery and reconstructive surgery are two separate specialties. "If the Army is doing breast augmentations, it's doing it to practice breast augmentations, period."

There has been talk lately among soldiers that this benefit is indeed being used as a recruiting tool, but there is no mention of it in any of the recruiting literature. "The Army does not offer elective cosmetic surgery to entice anyone," Dr. Lyons said. "I would be disappointed with the maturity of the young women in this country if they're joining the service with the thought of getting breast augmentations."

careerbuilder®

BEING ALL THAT YOU CAN BE

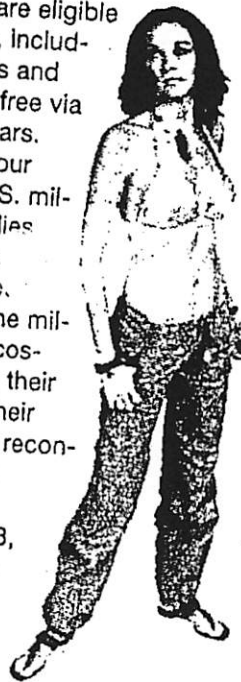
Are your breasts saggy or your thighs a little thick? Consider a career in the United States military.

Being a member of the armed forces gives you strength, courage and now the perfect set of pouty lips. According to a Reuters report, soldiers and their dependents are eligible for plastic surgery, including breast implants and liposuction, all for free via the taxpayers' dollars.

Members of all four branches of the U.S. military and their families can get any type of work done, from nose jobs to face-lifts. The military says this free cosmetic surgery helps their surgeons practice their skills (ostensibly for reconstructive surgery on injured soldiers).

From 2000 to 2003, military doctors performed 496 breast enlargements and 1,361 liposuction surgeries on soldiers and their dependents, according to a New Yorker magazine report.

Our question is, why are the surgeons practicing face lifts and breast augmentations? Are nice, firm breasts more conducive to stronger battlefield performance? Is it better military strategy to only have one chin?



THE COURIER-JOURNAL | SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2005 | A17

courier-journal.com

60% of women formerly in Guard, Reserves tell of sex harassment

"I am releasing the report ... to shine a light on a serious problem."
REP. LANE EVANS, D-Illinois