

Plastic surgery cheap, chancy for Peru poor

Racial bias pays off for ill-trained surgeons

By David Keop
ASSOCIATED PRESS

LIMA, Peru — A dingy, down-town stairway leads to a cramped waiting room and to a makeshift operating room where a doctor sells dreams of beauty to the nation's largely Indian poor.

Despite the risk of infection, disfigurement and death, Maria Espin nervously awaited her turn to undergo surgery, hoping that it will alter her Indian profile and change her luck.

"I know my life is going to improve when I look better," Espin, 22, said, squeezed together on a rickety couch with three other patients like her — dark-skinned, poor and nervous.

A lot of my friends have had plastic surgery and now have boy-friends and jobs.

Some have had problems, she conceded, but I'm willing to take the chance.

Lured by the promise of a prettier face and a brighter future, poor

Peruvians are flocking to clinics in rundown neighborhoods, where doctors with as little as a week's training in plastic surgery offer everything from nose surgery to breast implants at bargain prices.

With signs advertising plastic surgery and liposuction for as little as \$50, business is booming. So, too, are instances of medical calamity.

"Every day we see death, deformity and infection from botched operations by unqualified doctors," said Dr. Carlos Navarro, president of Peru's Plastic Surgeons Association.

Once a luxury for Peru's rich, plastic surgery in the past five years has become a beacon of a better life for its poor.

More than 80 percent of Peruvians are either Indian or mestizo and suffer discrimination at the hands of light-skinned, wealthy elite. Job offers in newspapers demand a "good physique," which sociologists say is code for a non-Indian appearance.

With demand high, the number of unqualified plastic surgeons has grown to between 200 and 300, in addition to the 80 who are certified.



MANCOW CHAPPELL/Associated Press
Patient or victim? Ana Ponce, 26, was given a rag to cover her face after undergoing plastic surgery Monday to alter her nose.

Navarro said.

On busy Avenida Alfonso Ugarte in crime-filled downtown Lima, a row of surgeons' offices stands amid swarms of street vendors and beggars.

The doctors working there lower costs by skipping basic safety measures, including blood and diabetes tests, electrocardiograms and other standard pre-operative procedures, said Dr. Cesar Morillas, Peru's most prestigious plastic surgeon.

"The patient is operated on

quickly in a small room behind the doctor's office in unhygienic conditions," Morillas said. "He leaves immediately afterward to catch the next bus home, often with a rag held to his face."

Plastic surgery has become a favorite second job for surgeons working in public hospitals, who are paid as little as \$300 a month.

Often, however, doctors tout themselves as plastic surgeons receive only a one-week training course. Malpractice suits are nonexistent.