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Cosmetic dermatology versus cosmetology: A misnomer in need of urgent correction

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Key Words: Cosmetology, Cosmetologist, Cosmetic Dermatologist, Cosmetic Dermatology

Tradition is a double-edged sword. Sometimes, it is misleading. And the terminology discussed in this letter is a classic example of the ill effects of a tradition. For years we in India, for some strange reason, have used the word ‘cosmetology’ instead of ‘cosmetic dermatology’! Like most traditions, this was never questioned and the word became widely used. Then came the day of awakening! After extensively searching literature and later during a discussion on the Internet with some members of Cosmetology Society of India (CSI), I questioned the appropriateness of the term ‘cosmetology’ in a dermatology setting. There was a consensus that we change the name of the society to ‘Cosmetic Dermatology Society of India’ with the abbreviation still remaining CSI. Hence, that procedure was initiated.

Today we see doctors’ signboards and prescriptions screaming ‘Dermatologist and Cosmetologist’ or describing all their cosmetic procedures offered in their clinics as ‘Cosmetology’. Some members of our community also talk in terms of offering courses or attending courses in ‘cosmetology.’ It is time to take a look at the definition of ‘cosmetology’ and a ‘cosmetologist’. Before proceeding to discuss the definition of ‘cosmetology,’ it is interesting to know that the word ‘cosmetology’ does not exist in any of the standard dermatology textbooks read anywhere in India or outside! Logically therefore, there is no mention of ‘cosmetologist’ either. This being done let us now look at official definitions of these controversial terms.

‘Cosmetology’ is defined as ‘the study of skin, hair and nails. The services dedicated to this type of work consist of hair-shaping, manicures, pedicures, application of artificial nails, special occasion hairstyling, shampooing hair, cosmetic application, body hair removal, chemical hair relaxers or straighteners, permanent waves, coloring and highlighting of hair and hair extensions or wig treatments.[1][3] A person who is licensed in cosmetology is called a cosmetologist.

A cosmetologist is also referred to as a beautician, a beauty specialist or an aesthetician. These persons specialize in giving beauty treatments. A general cosmetologist is proficient in all forms of beauty care and can give hair treatments, facials, skin treatments and nail treatments. This is purposeful for both men and women. There is a relative lack of mandate on qualifying as a cosmetologist or a cosmetician in India and that explains the mushrooming of beauty parlors and salons in every urban and rural nook and corner of this country. Let us now examine the issue in the context of countries where the terms “cosmetology” and “cosmetologist” are widely and correctly used. Cosmetologists need to be licensed to practise their field in USA and Europe.[1] This licensing can be obtained by anyone over the age of 16 years and has finished high school! Some states in USA make licensing possible as early as after passing the eighth grade! Sanitation and ethical practices are emphasized upon and eventually the individual becomes a qualified cosmetologist. The USA calls these people also as ‘personal appearance workers’.

It is unfortunate to note that dermatologists who are qualified physicians with a specialized qualification in dermatology...
are unwittingly degrading their status by calling themselves 'cosmetologists'. We take this opportunity to remind the community that cosmetology is a nonmedical qualification. A cosmetologist is akin to a beautician. A cosmetologist runs a commercial establishment where only beauty treatments are given by persons who have been qualified in giving beauty treatment for skin, hair and nails. We recommend that dermatologists who use the word 'cosmetology' visit the official website of the 'National Cosmetology Association', the world's largest association of salon professionals, to be reminded that it is a far cry from dermatology which has evolved as a very respectable and scientific field of medicine. It is against this background that CSI in India has changed its name to the internationally acceptable and recommended 'Cosmetic Dermatology Society of India', but still called as CSI. It is India's largest formal association of cosmetic dermatologists with over a thousand members. It is our effort to revert the current tendency to flippantly describe our cosmetic dermatological activities to 'cosmetology' or call ourselves 'cosmetologists'. Little do we realize that by doing so, we are unwittingly damaging our own reputation.

As dermatologists, we must use terms to capture the value and extent of our education and expertise. We are physicians first that care for the external aspects of the living body. We treat disease and must consider the health of the patient when we prescribe treatments. We are not cosmetologists who care for the cosmetic appearance of the nonliving body parts such as the hair and nails. This important distinction must be consistent worldwide for dermatology to remain a highly respected field.

We did a worldwide study of over 25 well-known cosmetic dermatologists of repute and respectable standing in the field of cosmetic dermatology who uniformly agreed that the terms 'cosmetology' and 'cosmetologist' used by a dermatologist to describe himself/herself is almost pejorative, self-degrading and erroneous. It should be discarded and the correct term 'cosmetic dermatologist' should be employed.

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