

Development of aesthetic surgery in the Czech Republic – the situation before the COVID pandemic, during the pandemic, and expected changes in the practice of aesthetic surgery in the post-COVID period

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Dear Sir,
aesthetic surgery has become a popular medical specialty worldwide in recent years. According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS), over 12 million surgical procedures will be performed worldwide in 2021 (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2022). Although there are no official statistics, the interest in aesthetic surgery in the Czech Republic is also growing yearly.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first reported in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan, and soon, in March 2020, it was established by the WHO as a pandemic. More than 350 million cases have been identified globally, and more than 6 million cases have resulted in death. During the first and second waves of the pandemic, the healthcare system witnessed the cancellation of routine consultations, check-ups, surgeries, and interventions that could have been postponed. These were primarily in fields such as cosmetic and aesthetic surgery, where most procedures are semi-elective or elective.

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons' annual statistical reports, 2020 was the first year to see a decline in cosmetic surgery procedures

since the early 21st century. The number of cosmetic surgery procedures in 2020 decreased to 15,6 million (–15%) from 2019, which was 18.4 million [1].

Aesthetic surgeons, in general, expected the pandemic to hurt their practice, as in some countries, the practice of aesthetic surgery was suspended entirely, and people in these fields sometimes found themselves out of work. This led to huge socio-economic consequences for many private practices and clinics. In the Czech Republic, despite all the pandemic measures, aesthetic surgery clinics were not closed throughout the pandemic, and the demand for aesthetic surgery procedures increased, according to unofficial statistics. Therefore, in countries such as the Czech Republic, the aesthetic industry enjoyed an increase in the number of procedures.

The pandemic situation has changed and may yet change the whole world significantly, and it is clear that this virus will not disappear from the world for some time. It is, therefore, still not entirely clear how the situation regarding the performance of cosmetic surgery procedures may change over time. The primary interest of this research study is to focus on the perspective of indi-

viduals who have dedicated their medical practice to aesthetic surgery and their view of the entire situation and possible future prognosis within the Czech Republic.

The research results are based on an online questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was distributed via email over two months (April and October 2021). The questionnaire contained 53 closed and open-ended questions in which the respondents could clarify their answers, add information, and verbally evaluate the whole situation. The questions were thematically divided into three categories – the situation before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation during the pandemic, and the expected changes in the post-COVID era.

All specialists involved in aesthetic surgery who agreed to participate in the survey were included. The questionnaire was completely anonymous, and participants were encouraged to send in the final anonymized results. In the end, 11 male and female specialists participated in the research. Although this is not a high number of respondents, we perceive the results of this survey as valuable, as research of this kind has not been recorded in the Czech Republic.

The questionnaire survey results are supported by in-depth interviews we conducted with 10 aesthetic surgeons (8 male, 3 female) during February–May 2023.

We received responses from a total of 11 people, 5 of whom were women (45.5%) and 6 of whom were men (54.5%).

According to age categories, 4 respondents were in the age category of 40–50 years, 4 in the age category of 51–60 years, 2 in the age category of 61–70 years, and 1 in the age category of 71–80 years. Seven respondents practice aesthetic surgery in Prague, 1 in Pardubice, 1 in Hradec Králové, 1 in Karlovy Vary, and 1 in Plzeň.

According to the type of practice, 4 respondents were owners of clinics, 2 were employees of an outpatient clinic, 4 were chiefs of an aesthetic surgery department, and 1 worked in a combination of a government health facility and private practice.

Ten male and female respondents specialized in aesthetic procedures such as liposuction, augmentation, facelifts, hyaluronic acid and botox injections, thread lifts, anti-aging therapy, and eyelid surgery. One of the respondents specialized in vaginoplasty. These procedures are a relatively new and controversial topic (not only) in medical circles. Vaginal rejuvenation is considered the most controversial procedure within this aesthetic specialty, which was also performed by one respondent [2].

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary clientele of all respondents consisted mainly of middle-aged women from the Czech Republic, and three respondents had a significant proportion of foreign clientele (women), followed by older women mainly from the Czech Republic. Two respondents stated that their clientele was evenly distributed regarding gender, age, and domestic and foreign clientele. The predominant mix of female clients supports research claims that middle-aged women are

the primary clients/patients of cosmetic surgery clinics [1]. The middle-aged generation of women is an exciting but still under-researched group of individuals. Although these women are not perceived as old by society, their appearance no longer matches the ideal of beauty and femininity due to visible wrinkles [3].

During the pandemic, the composition of the clientele changed significantly in terms of age and gender. During the pandemic, foreign clientele decreased due to travel restrictions and the temporary closure of the Czech border. On the contrary, during this period, there was a new increase in the number of so-called domestic clients. In some cases, the ratio of new patients to regular patients was more in favor of the new ones; in one case, it was 80 : 20, and in another case, even 90 : 10 in favor of new clients.

The consultation is considered an essential point of the entire process leading up to an aesthetic surgery procedure. The role of the specialist is to help synthesize the clients' wishes at this time. During the consultation, the erudite surgeon will assess the appropriateness of a specific procedure for a particular patient, ensuring that the surgery's benefits outweigh the potential risks and that there is no negative outcome of the process. Visual and verbal communication between the two parties creates the best chance of leading to an agreement and establishing a relationship, which positively correlates with client satisfaction.

Before the onset of the pandemic, two respondents had an average of 0–4 consultations per day, six respondents had 5–10 consultations per day, and three respondents had an average of 11–20 consultations per day.

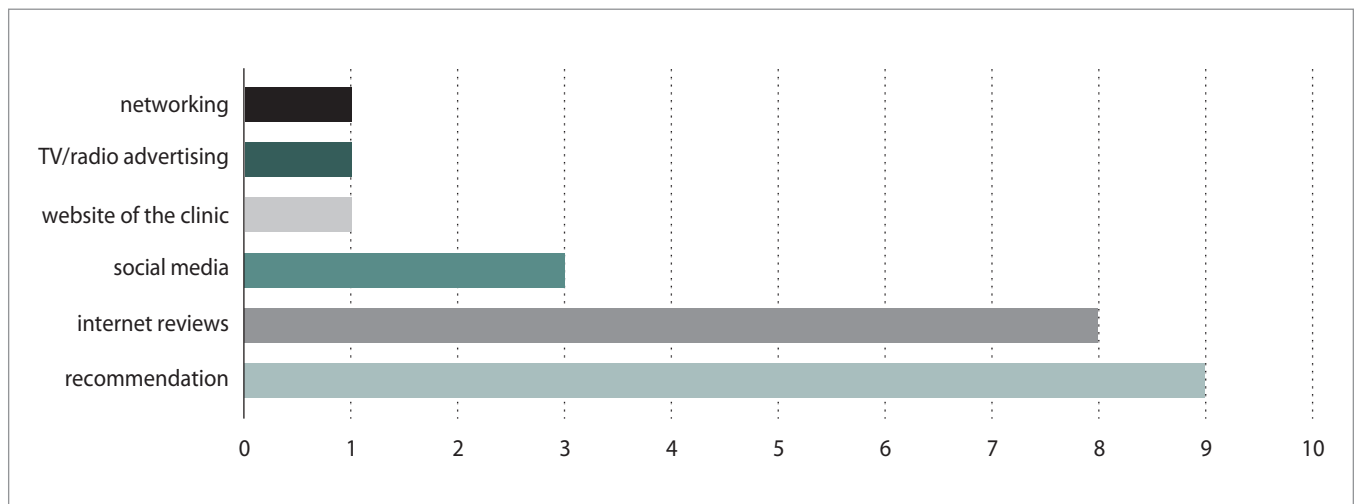
The number of consultations corresponded to the average waiting time for the procedure. Six male/female respondents reported that the average waiting time for procedures was 2 to 3 weeks before the pandemic. The rest

of the respondents then stated that the waiting time was more than 3 weeks. In the first months of the pandemic, the medical sector generally experienced cancellations and postponements of non-acute interventions and surgeries. Although cosmetic surgery clinics may not have been closed for the entire period, respondents reported that they, too, had to cancel some procedures for various reasons during the first and second waves of the pandemic. The most common reason was clients' fear of contracting the virus or inability to follow all pandemic precautions. Two respondents also reported that their clinic/practice had to reduce staff due to the pandemic outbreak.

Due to restrictions on travel from abroad, temporary border closures and fear of an accelerating pandemic, 8 of the 11 respondents lost foreign clientele. On the other hand, the number of Czech clients increased. The increase in interest in these procedures among Czech men and women was obvious, as shown by the number of consultations and procedures performed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The average number of consultations increased during the pandemic, despite the loss of foreign clientele. One respondent even reported that his number of consultations increased to an average of more than 20 consultations per day, compared to the original 0–4 before the pandemic. The increase in the number of clients during the COVID-19 pandemic was also supported by the fact that people feared that all aesthetic clinics would close again, and their surgeries would be cancelled or postponed indefinitely.

As the number of consultations increased during the pandemic, the waiting time for surgery also changed, with the average waiting time for surgery rising due to the higher number of surgeries performed.

The new consultation is one of the most crucial moments leading to the cosmetic surgery procedure.



Graph 1. Marketing practices to reach clients before the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, communication between the aesthetic surgeon and patient was mainly based on face-to-face and telephone consultations; internet and virtual consultations were used relatively little (on average, 10–20% of all communication). Only one respondent used the internet in more than 20% of cases, while three respondents did not use it at all. Four respondents said that they used communication via social networks such as Messenger.

During the pandemic, three respondents said they did not use online consultations even during the pandemic, three respondents said they used the internet 10% of the time, one 25% of the time, one 75% of the time, and one even 99% of the time. Although the number of online consultations increased during the pandemic, male and female respondents had reservations about this type of consultation. According to them, the main disadvantages included lack of personal contact, the impossibility of examination, it was time consuming, and had less affinity of the client to keep the appointment or pay for online consultation. On the other hand, one respondent saw the benefits of online consultation in saving time during client travel and reducing the fear of contracting an infection while travelling for consultation. One respondent stated that WhatsApp

is a suitable communication medium for online communication, but even this is not suitable for all types of consultations. In his opinion, in almost all cases, face-to-face consultation is necessary due to patient examination. However, for most of the respondents, the disadvantages associated with this type of communication prevailed. Thus, it is clear that not all professions can use online technology and online options are a suitable tool for them.

Marketing promotion is important for the presentation of a clinic or a particular doctor.

A list of the methods used by surgeons to reach new potential clients before the pandemic can be found in Graph 1 (respondents could select multiple options, therefore the sum of the responses was not 11 or 100%),

Prior to the onset of the COVID pandemic, new potential patients primarily learned about the respondents as aesthetic surgery specialists by reading online reviews and personal recommendations. This method of effective marketing is also confirmed by the results of the in-depth interviews with the aesthetic surgeons we interviewed. According to their opinions, personal recommendations from current patients are an influential marketing tactic, as well as reviews on the Internet, which can be very

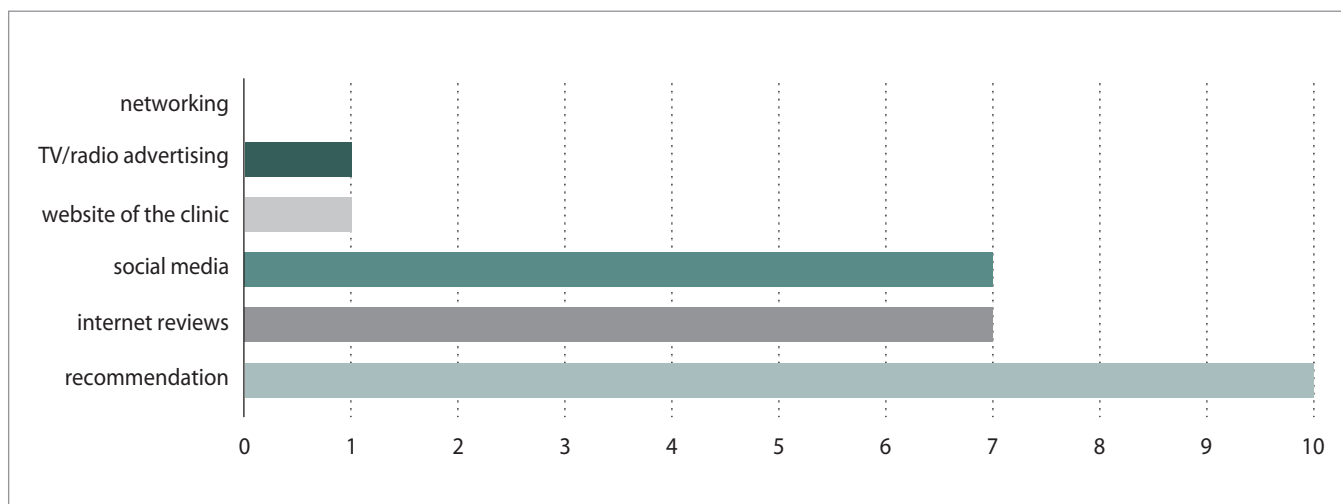
helpful for specialists to attract new patients, but also detrimental if the reviews are negative in nature.

Prior to COVID, the respondents themselves were most concerned about marketing and promotion of the clinic in four cases. In two cases, it was the clinic's owner, practice manager or manager. In one case, the clinic where the respondent worked had its own marketing department and in one case, an external company was used. One respondent gave no response.

Graph 2 shows the list of ways in which respondents learn about new potential patients/clients during the pandemic (respondents could select multiple options, so the sum of responses was not 11 or 100%).

However, all respondents unanimously stated that in no case did their marketing promotion increase dramatically during the pandemic.

One of the themes raised in the questionnaire was the potential motivations that led to increased interest in aesthetic surgery procedures. Within the respondents' statements, motives that could have influenced the increased interest in aesthetic surgery procedures among Czech women were identified. Similar motives were also identified in a 2022 report by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, which specifically iden-



Graph 2. Marketing practices to reach clients during a pandemic.

tified motives such as inability to travel, money saved or feeling better about the ongoing pandemic [4].

A very interesting finding was that 100% of respondents reported that their patients cited video conferencing at work during home-office hours as a new motive for their decision to have the procedure, which acted as a source of dissatisfaction with their appearance. People had moved meetings and appointments to the online space, and this increased the number of video calls and video conferences. People spent more time in front of their computers, with plenty of time to view their own faces on monitors. The time spent in front of screens caused people to become more aware of their shortcomings, and self-esteem deteriorated. However, this could often be linked to imperfect image transmission and poor lighting. However, people were not aware of this possibility and chose to address their appearance problems to a greater extent through cosmetic surgery procedures. A similar situation has also been confirmed in international research and it is called "ZOOM-boom" [5]. However, psychologist Robin Horstein urges caution with ZOOM-inspired procedures (called ZOOM face-envy), noting that decisions may be based on a newly created (temporary) reality and cautions against

making judgments about one's appearance and changing it in that reality.

With this new emerging trend of video conferencing, it is important for the medical community to address this negative trend and be prepared to possibly address the increasing number of people with so-called ZOOM dysmorphia who will be visiting aesthetic surgery clinics.

Unbelievable as it may seem at first sight, in the era of the need to wear face masks, there was dissatisfaction with the appearance of men in particular, who complained about the deterioration of their ears, and there was an increased interest in so-called otoplasty (earlobe surgery) in plastic surgery and otorhinolaryngology departments.

Another motive mentioned for the increased number of these interventions, according to the respondents, is the ability of patients to work from home. Clients used the home-office period for convalescence. During this time, clients did not have to show their faces in public after the procedure, and the pandemic situation offered an easier and more discreet recovery after surgery.

The last reason mentioned was the financial situation of new clients. During the pandemic period, especially during the lockdown, there was limited opportunity to travel, visit cultural, enter-

tainment and sports facilities and other activities. This saved people a greater amount of money, which they could then use as an investment in cosmetic surgery procedures.

Closely related to this was the use of various benefits from employers, which often included a contribution to certain medical procedures, such as eyelid surgery. As employee benefits could not be drawn in the form of allowances for sports, culture and holidays during the pandemic and lockdown, there was an increased interest in these procedures.

In terms of expected changes after the COVID pandemic, physicians were most concerned about the re-closure of practices. Aesthetic surgeons also anticipated strengthening of the Czech clientele and a more significant decline in foreign clientele. Based on the interviews conducted, it was found that foreign clientele has returned to the Czech Republic, and aesthetic surgery clinics are thriving.

This study focused on mapping the situation among Czech aesthetic surgeons, their working career before the pandemic, the changes in their professional life within the set scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the expected changes after the end of the pandemic measures and the current functioning of clinics.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the borders of most countries were closed to varying extent, and all activities and services that were less important at the time were halted. Although, at first, people were apprehensive about this new situation and there were cancellations of scheduled interventions, the situation changed after a while, and everyone adapted very quickly to the so-called "new normal". Although most of the rules that the pandemic brought into our daily lives have already lost their validity, the social life virtualized and defined by the "new normal" will continue to influence clientele for several years.

The research results are not based on a robust sample of respondents' responses. Therefore, it is impossible to generalize or draw broad conclusions from the findings of this survey. Nevertheless, we believe this research is valuable, as it opens not only the topic of aesthetic surgery in the Czech Re-

public in general but also the topic of societal changes in the way of life from a new perspective. This study may thus become a starting point for further research in this area.

Roles of authors

Michaela Honelová – main author and investigator, review of the literature, acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data, critical revision of the manuscript, crafting of the manuscript;

Martina Nováková – analysis and interpretation of data, crafting of the manuscript, statistical analysis;

Lucie Vidovičová – critical revision of the manuscript, crafting of the manuscript.

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