Commentary

Commentary on: The Fountain of Stem Cell-Based Youth? Online Portrayals of Anti-Aging Stem Cell Technologies

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The phrase “stem cell therapy” is flouted liberally, and yet there is disconnect between what is offered, reality, the public’s expectation, and proven, validated medical knowledge. In fact, some have used it to refer to cells from the stem of a plant. However, there is no doubt that stem cells do have many potential therapeutic uses as yet unexplored and will certainly be relevant in aesthetic medicine and the aesthetic-related industry moving forward.

Although the attitude of plastic surgeon towards stem cell therapy has been looked at, this timely article from Rachul et al addresses the hype surrounding stem cells and the “scienceploitation” of this phenomenon as they relate to public portrayal. It is clear that the well-oiled marketing machine of the cosmetic industry is miles ahead of scientific proof when it comes to stem cell therapy. Given the approximately 4700 registered trials on stem cell therapy found by the authors in the ClinicalTrials.gov database there is no shortage of interest, but as yet little proven effect for cosmetic use.

The variety of claims of beneficial cosmetic effects using stem cells is fascinating; I suspect most of us have been faced with a patient asking for a stem cell therapy this is supposedly in routine use, yet we’ve never heard of it. As such, the article notes that “modal auxiliaries and adverbs also help obscure the certainty and temporality of the role of stem cells in anti-aging.” By conducting a review and content analysis, the authors showed what many suspect of the marketing hype behind stem cell use in cosmetic products and procedures. As there is little legislation on the claims that can be made on websites in the name of science, it is impossible to police.

This article once again shows the important role of educating our patients about what I call the “what, where, and whom principle” of an aesthetic surgeon’s practice. The “what, where, and whom principle” can be briefly described as (1) What: is this the correct procedure for the patient’s condition; (2) Where: in what type of facility should it be done; and (3) Whom: is the practitioner suited to perform it. As aesthetic surgeons we have been quite good at this for standard surgical procedures, but with the recent surge in stem cell procedures and products we again need to take the helm in order to advocate for our patients. Providing unbiased and substantiated information will allow patients to base their decisions in science, not marketing hype. Otherwise the void will be filled with promotional misinformation and financially driven pseudoscience. This unfortunately is already happening and I believe will continue to get worse and more confusing for unsuspecting patients unless we make a concerted effort to combat it with validated, scientific, and understandable information. I thank the authors for conducting this content analysis and bringing this information to our attention.

Disclosures

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