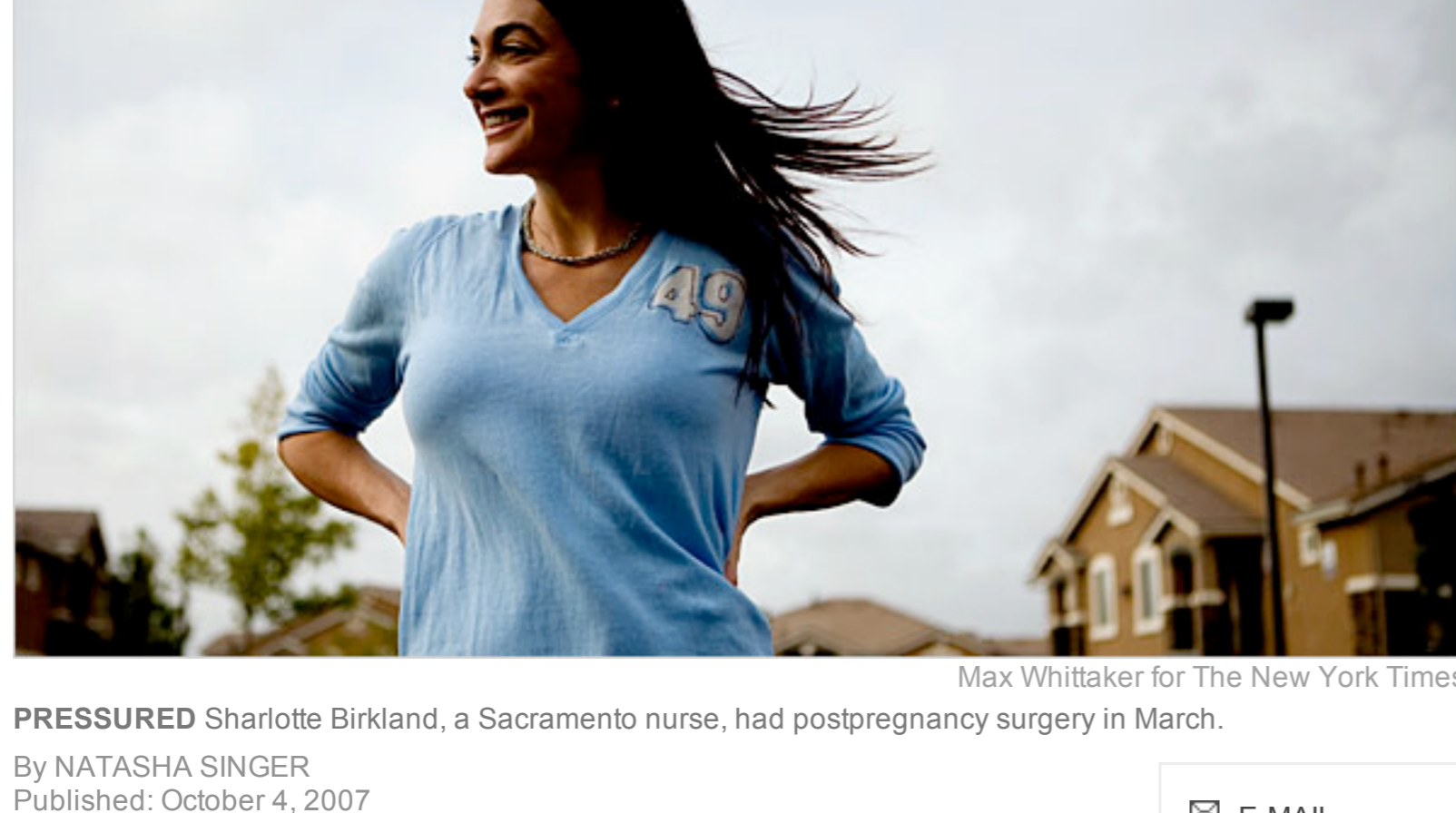


SKIN DEEP

# Is the 'Mom Job' Really Necessary?



Max Whittaker for The New York Times

**PRESSURED** Charlotte Birkland, a Sacramento nurse, had postpregnancy surgery in March.

By NATASHA SINGER  
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**DR. DAVID A. STOKER**, a plastic surgeon in Marina Del Rey, Calif., has a surgical cure for the ravages of motherhood. He, like many plastic surgeons nationwide, calls it a “mommy makeover.”

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**THE PITCH** A makeover surgery package usually costs more than \$10,000.

lose their “baby weight.” Even *Cookie*, a luxury parenting magazine, recently ran an article that described postpregnancy breasts as “the ultimate indignity” and promoted implant surgery; a photo of droopy water-filled balloons accompanied the article.

Many women struggle with the impact of aging and pregnancy on their bodies. But the marketing of the “mommy makeover” seeks to pathologize the postpartum body, characterizing pregnancy and childbirth as maladies with disfiguring aftereffects that can be repaired with the help of scalpels and cannulae.

“The message is that, after having children, women’s bodies change for the worse,” said Diana Zuckerman, the president of the National Research Center for Women and Families, a nonprofit group in Washington. If marketing could turn the postpregnancy body “into a socially unacceptable thing, think of how big your audience would be and how many surgeries you could sell them,” she said.

Pregnancy affects each woman differently, with age and [genetics](#) playing a role in how the body recovers. While many plastic surgeons argue that pregnancy both “deforms” breasts and redistributes fat so that it becomes difficult to exercise away, some obstetricians disagree.

“Some women have stretch marks from pregnancy or weight gain,” said Dr. Erin E. Tracy, an assistant professor in obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive biology at the Harvard Medical School. “But there is no intrinsic abnormality to the breasts or the abdomen.”

Mommy surgery appeals both as a quick fix for stubborn postpregnancy weight and as a way to control aging itself. Dozens of doctors devote parts of their Web sites to the mom job, including Dr. Lloyd M. Krieger, a plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills, Calif., who offers the Rodeo Drive Mommy Makeover for women who want “their tummies and breasts back the way they looked before pregnancy.”

Mommy surgery came to public attention earlier this year after the American Society of Plastic Surgeons reported a rise in [cosmetic surgery](#) among women of child-bearing age (not all of whom are necessarily mothers). Last year, doctors nationwide performed more than 325,000 “mommy makeover procedures” on women ages 20 to 39, up 11 percent from 2005, the group said. And last Sunday, the ABC drama “Brothers and Sisters” included a playground scene in which one mother asked, “Do you think I should get a mommy job?”

After the birth of her second son in 2000, Katie Helein, a saleswoman for a human resources company in St. Louis, worked out with a personal trainer three times a week for eight months. But Ms. Helein, now 37, said she didn’t like her shape.

“I had really badly stretched skin, I lost fullness up top, nothing was where it was supposed to be even though I was doing sit-ups ‘til the cows came home,” she said. “I just wanted my body back.”

In 2001, she had a tummy tuck and liposuction, followed by breast augmentation in 2004, she said. Now her smiling face, and those of her sons, is featured in the “mommy makeover” section of [stlcosmeticsurgery.com](#), the Web site of her plastic surgeon, Dr. William H. Huffaker.

Dr. Huffaker said that several years ago he noticed an increase in mothers who came to his office with concerns about stretched skin and postpregnancy fat that they could not exercise away. Now he operates on three to four mothers a week who have breast procedures, tummy tucks and liposuction in one go at a cost of about \$12,000 to \$15,000, he said.

“Women do have trouble getting back together,” said Dr. Huffaker. “You don’t just do a couple of exercises and get skinny again.”

Mothers of college-age children are also opting for the procedures.

Charlotte Birkland, a neonatal nurse in Sacramento, has a 20-year-old son. This March, she went to Dr. Stoker for breast implant surgery, a tummy tuck on her lower abdomen and liposuction of her upper abdomen.

“I had been thin all my life until I had my son and then I got this pooch of overhanging fat on my abdomen that you can’t get rid of,” Ms. Birkland, 39, said. “And your breasts become deflated sacks.”

There is more pressure on mothers today to look young and sexy than on previous generations, she added. “I don’t think it was an issue for my mother; your husband loved you no matter what,” said Ms. Birkland, who recently remarried.

Dr. Stoker said that he performs combination surgeries on mothers at least once a week, at a cost of \$10,000 to \$30,000.

“It’s comforting to women to know that there are many other mothers out there with a similar cluster of physical issues that are bothering them,” he said.

But other surgeons worry that packaging multiple procedures under a cutesy nickname could induce women to have additional operations, potentially increasing their risk of everything from infections to death.

Various studies published in medical journals have reported death rates from liposuction at one in 5,000 procedures to one in 50,000 procedures.

In Dallas, a father and son who are plastic surgeons, Dr. Harlan Pollock and Dr. Todd Pollock, use their Web site, [www.drpolllock.com](#), to expose the “mommy makeover” as a sales tactic.

“Clever marketing may encourage correction of a deformity that was previously of little concern,” the doctors write. “In other words, a woman seeking a tummy tuck, although not particularly concerned about the appearance of her breasts, may be influenced to have breast surgery just because it is part of ‘the package.’”

Some health advocates aren’t buying the idea that cosmetic changes from pregnancy merit medical management.

“Some women go back to a pretty flat stomach and some don’t, some go back to their pre-baby weight and some don’t,” said Judy Norsigian, the executive director of Our Bodies Ourselves, a health group in Boston, and an author of the book of the same name. “The question is, does that need to be treated with a surgical makeover?”

On the blog *StrollerDerby*, Karen Murphy, a mother of four, lambasted mommy surgery.

“Those badges of motherhood have turned into badges of shame and, if you’re the one caught without a tummy tuck, then you won’t get invited to the party,” she wrote. “It peeves me no end that something as drastic as surgery, as this blatant nonacceptance of one’s own body in whatever shape it happens to be in, has become so pervasive.”

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