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Preparing for 'the Biltmore lift' took research, time

This is part one of a three-part story about Beacon correspondent Mary Koppenheffer's experience planning for, having and healing from a face lift. Part one covers the preparation, part two the procedure and first week post-op and part three is the healing process and the results at six weeks after the surgery.

By Mary Koppenheffer

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It's Sunday night. I'm staring into the mirror and pushing up the sagging areas of my face to recall how I used to look before gravity took its toll. Am I really going to have a face lift tomorrow morning? I am. A "Biltmore Lift" by Dr. David Harley, to be exact.

When women "of a certain age" get together, the topic of plastic surgery comes up from time to time. What are the possibilities? What are the risks? Can we turn back the clock, or are we just being vain? I admit to being intrigued by extreme makeover shows.

Over the past couple of years, I've occasionally caught a glimpse of myself and thought that I just didn't look as good as I felt, or as good as I'd like. It's not that I think I look awful. I don't. It's just that the skin on the sides of my face has started to sag, causing my mouth to form a perpetual frown, and it bothers me.

I take care of myself — eat well, run, strength train and do yoga. I try to stay on top of fashion trends (within reason). But the face. There simply is a limit to what one can do with makeup, or with creams or lotions or masks promising to firm up the skin. From my research, surgery was the only way to really get the change I was looking for.

Before consulting with Dr. Harley, I had to overcome my "face lift" phobia. I remember 1978 when Betty Ford spent five days in the hospital following her surgery, and came out looking like somebody shrunk her face. And, back then, it was a big reveal when she actually admitted to having the work done. Like maybe we wouldn't notice she looked entirely different.

And who hasn't caught a glimpse of a "face lifts gone bad" tabloid story while waiting in line at the grocery store?

But frankly, I might not have considered actually having a face lift had my sister not had one in the fall. The exact same procedure with Dr. Harley. I didn't know she had even planned it. But, when I saw her a few weeks after the surgery, I couldn't believe my eyes.

She looked great. Sagging skin was lifted, and her jaw line was contoured beautifully.

It was still her...she didn't look "different." She looked rested, relaxed and younger.

A month before "the lift," I decided to tell some friends what I had planned. Maybe I was looking for confirmation that this was a good idea. Of course, there was the obligatory, "you don't need that!" followed by, "I'd love to have that done." Or, they launched into various other nips and tucks they have thought about. "I'd love to get my eyes done," or "my nose has always bothered me." Immediately hands went to faces, as each pointed out the areas they were

Facelift continues on 8 ▶

Mary Koppenheffer pho

CONSULTATION — Dr. David Harley consults wi a client in his Asheville office.

FACELIFT: Research, questions key to decision

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less than thrilled with.

The response surprised me — I was expecting more of "I'd never do that," or "I'm proud of my wrinkles." Not so much among my friends and colleagues, apparently, and they are pretty much regular working gals.

What has kept them from moving forward was generally a lack of first-hand knowledge of what would happen.

I don't take any surgical procedure lightly, and this is no exception. I researched Dr. Harley, read up on the procedure, and weighed the risks vs. rewards.

Risks assessed

I asked Dr. Harley who was a good candidate for the Biltmore Lift.

"Most of my patients range in age from 55 to 70 years old, but I have performed the Biltmore Lift on patients in their 30s all the way up to their 80s. I emphasize to every patient that safety is of utmost importance to me, so each patient is carefully evaluated from a medical standpoint to determine if he or she is a candidate. Those patients who benefit the most are those with obvious signs of aging such as saggy 'bulldog' jowls or a 'turkey gobbler' neck."

Bulldog jowls? Turkey gobbler neck? Ouch.

Dr. Harley called the procedure minimally invasive and different from traditional face lifts in that the scarring, the downtime, the risk of a windblown appearance and the cost are all on a much smaller scale. I was happy to hear that.

He said he would use local anesthesia rather than general anesthesia, which makes the procedure easier to tolerate than most dental work.

I am hoping that Dr. Harley can contour my jawline to give it a more youthful appearance, and it sounds like he can. "The procedure takes dead aim at improving the lower part of the face, the jawline and the upper neck. Usually 1 to 2 inches of saggy skin is lifted and removed from each side, and through tightening a layer of deep fibrous, muscular tissue called the SMAS, not only can the jawline be contoured, but the jowls can be lifted and the skin and fat of the neck removed."

Bring up the sagging jowls and tighten up the neck. Perfect.

Incisions visible?

I asked Dr. Harley where incisions would be made and whether my hairline would change. He said in a short scar face lift, the incisions are hidden under the sideburns and in the curves and shadows of the ear, which is why a mature scar can be extremely difficult to detect. Neither the position of the hairline nor sideburns is altered. So, that handles worries about scarring.

The main risks of any surgical procedure include bleeding, infection, wound healing problems and the need for additional procedures, Dr. Harley said. In this case, the bleeding risk is between 1 and 5 percent, while the risk of infection after facial surgery is exceedingly low. He said in short scar procedures, wound healing problems are nearly nonexistent. I'm comfortable with that.

I wanted to make sure the surgeon performing the surgery had a lot of experience.

I found Dr. Harley had performed face and neck lift surgery on more 400 patients and more than 1,000 procedures when upper and lower eyelid and brow lift surgery is added in. A++ on experience.

I felt comfortable with Dr. Harley from the start. His Hendersonville Road office is a converted 1950s bungalow, and it doesn't feel clinical at all. Educated at Dartmouth and Vanderbilt, he completed two residencies.

A friend asked me how long the results would last. I hadn't thought to ask about that.

"I am removing redundant skin and fat that will not return," he said. "I am tightening muscles and other tissues that will take time and gravity to once again loosen. Therefore the changes I am making will be permanent. Now obviously I cannot stop the clock and I cannot overcome the forces of gravity and time. But what I can do is reposition tissue to a more youthful position so that the 65-year-old who had the procedure at 55 will appear younger after 10 years than she would had she never had the procedure."

Will it hurt?

Naturally I wanted to know how long it would take and how much, if any, pain I would feel.

"The procedure takes approximately two hours from start to finish. I will administer by mouth a relaxing medication, something to settle the stomach and an antibiotic, followed by a very slow numbing process that allows me to get the patient completely numb, while still being awake. Therefore the patient does not feel any pain with the procedure itself, and most people dose off to a peaceful sleep until the procedure is over and it's time to go."

It was great to get confirmation from my sister that this really was the case, as I'm no hero when it comes to pain.

Since I work full time, and I'm currently training for the San Francisco half marathon which is two months after the procedure, I really wanted to know how long will it take to heal. And, I admit to a nightmare about finishing the half marathon and then having my face fall back down.

"I have had patients return to their social life and work just three days after surgery, and I have had those who take two weeks off from work. Typically I recommend that someone who works Monday through Friday have the procedure done on a Thursday or Friday and then take the following week off, which essentially gives you 10 to 11 days until returning to work. You will follow up with me one week after surgery for suture removal and a check up to make sure your healing is progressing normally. If you need to see me sooner, or if you have a question or problem, every patient gets my personal cell phone number so I can easily be contacted."

Regarding running and working out, Dr. Harley told me "Patients may return to physical activity such as jogging and light weight training as early as two weeks after the procedure, but I would recommend listening to your body and not pursuing anything very strenuous for four weeks."

All of my questions have been answered, and now I'm ready for the big day.

'Biltmore lift' surgery a relaxed procedure with big results

Editor's note: This is part two of a three-part story about Beacon correspondent Mary Koppenheffer's experience planning for, having and healing from a face lift. Part one covered the preparation, part two discusses the procedure and first few days post-op; and part three will cover the healing process and the results at six weeks after the surgery.

By Mary Koppenheffer

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The "big day" was finally here. Today I am going to Dr. David Harley's office just outside of Biltmore Forest for a face lift known as a "Biltmore Lift." My husband, Ron, came with me, since I wouldn't be able to drive home after taking the pain medication.

We arrived at Dr. Harley's office at 9 a.m. His office is a converted 1950s bungalow on Hendersonville Road, and it feels more like a cozy home than a setting for surgery. I'm greeted by Dr. Harley's wife, Nicole, who asks me if I'm excited. I am. I feel relaxed and ready. Surprisingly, not at all nervous. The atmosphere is cheerful and fun. As surgeries go, this is happy stuff, and I'm feeling pretty great.

I came to the office with the medications Dr. Harley had prescribed — an antibiotic to ward off infection, Valium to relax me, and Phenergan to settle my stomach. Sitting in the waiting area, Dr. Harley administers my "face lift cocktail," and within minutes I'm sinking into a very relaxed state.

Dr. Harley escorts me into his surgical room. I am really feeling no pain. His nurse, Kelly, helps me get situated, and this show is on the road. I am tired and already feel like drifting off. Before I do, I feel a sensation around my chin which in hindsight I believe was the local anesthesia being administered. It did not hurt, it just felt "curious," like a few light pricks around my jaw.

Surgery continues on 7 ▶

Donated photo

PREPPING A FACE LIFT — Mary Koppenheffer is prepared for a face lift procedure known as a 'Biltmore lift' at the office of Dr. David Harley just outside Biltmore Forest.

SURGERY

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While I feel this, Kelly is massaging my arm to help me relax even further. And when I say it did not hurt, that statement comes from someone who pays for general anesthesia at the oral surgeon.

As for the procedure, that is all I can remember. I did nod off, and when I woke up, Dr. Harley and Kelly said I looked great, everything went well, and Ron was helping me to the car. I looked like Jacob Marley in A Christmas Carol with bandages around my head, and under my chin. My pre-surgery instructions were to wear a shirt that did not need to go over my head, so I would not disturb the stitches.

The rest of the day was spent at home in a lounge chair blissfully enjoying daytime TV and fading in and out of sleep. How bad can that be? I took medication as prescribed, and I did not feel any pain. Of course I wanted to see instant results, but realistically, I knew a face lift was not a "lunch time procedure," and I will just have to wait.

I was not really hungry throughout the day, and I couldn't open my mouth very wide, so Haagen Dazs was on the menu.

Sleeping was a challenge for me. My post surgical instructions were to sleep propped up with a few pillows so I would not lie flat. I'm a side sleeper, and sleeping on my back just does not feel natural. And of course I was aware of the bandages. I kept reminding myself that it would just be a short time, and I made it through the night pretty comfortably.

Now, the question will be, how long before I really can enjoy the results of the face lift?

The next day I was back in Dr. Harley's office where he took off the bandages and inspected his work. He said I was looking good, and I took his word for it. Post-op instructions were to clean the wounds with half-strength hydrogen peroxide twice a day, and apply an antibiotic ointment every four hours. The stitches would come out in a week. I was allowed to wash my hair, but I did so trying to keep the shampoo away from the healing incisions.

Speaking of stitches, I couldn't really see much. The scar from the neck lift was under my chin, and the face lift stitches were hidden behind my ears. There were also some stitches above my ears in the hairline, which I could not see at all, but I could feel them when I wore my glasses.

My face was swollen, and there was some light bruising around my jaw and neck. I continued with pain medication for two days post surgery, and that was all I needed.

Dr. Harley gave me a white nylon helmet with a velcro chin strap to sleep in, and I also wore it several times a day to hold ice packs. I was dreaming of looking better than before, but for now, I looked like Joan of Arc, who, I'm pretty sure, had other things on her mind than bulldog jowls.

The head gear was actually pretty functional, since I could put the ice packs on the sides of my face and the cap held them in place. Ron, my husband of 33 years, had the pleasure of seeing me walk around the house wearing the skull cap with three ice packs protruding from the sides of my face and my chin. We are still together. I reminded him the best was yet to come.

I continued to ice my face off and on for about two weeks, and by then, the swelling was substantially reduced, but not gone. In fact, it may take a few months before the swelling completely disappears.

I continued to take pain medication on the day after the surgery, as well as in the morning of the second day post-surgery, and by the afternoon I really felt fine, needed no pain meds, and was working from home. No pain, but I was aware that my face was swollen, especially out toward the ears. I stayed home for two days after the surgery and relaxed.

On the third day post surgery, I planned to get out of the house and see some clients. I was a little apprehensive about how they would think I looked.

As healing begins, improvements begin to show

Editor's note: This is part three of a three-part story about Beacon correspondent Mary Koppenheffer's experience planning for, having and healing from a face lift. Part one covered the preparation, part two the procedure and first few days post-op; and part three is the healing process and the results at six weeks after the surgery.

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Two days days after I had a "Biltmore Lift" by Dr. David Harley, I planned to venture out to take some photos for the Beacon. This was my first trip in public since I had the procedure. Prior to the surgery, I had purchased Derma Blend makeup at the mall to cover bruising. Their website shows a bride in a white strapless gown who successfully covers up black tattoos on her back using Derma Blend.

So, with a scarf covering my head and tied around my neck a la Audrey Hepburn, I made my first public appearance at a ribbon cutting in Biltmore Park Town Square. Although I felt "thick," (being swollen from about three inches on either side of my nose back toward the ears), I looked fine. I expected some stares, but got none. The healing had begun, and I was on my way to being able to see the improvements I hoped for.

A few words about bruising. I had heard that there was a lot after a face lift. That was not my experience. While I had some bruising around the chin and neck, it was fairly light, and any makeup would probably have covered it.

On a weekend trip to Florida a few weeks after my lift, though, I saw a women who had clearly had a face lift very recently. She was wearing a scarf, but the amount of bruising around her chin and neck was extensive. I was really taken aback, since I did not have anything like that. Bruising may be a very personal thing, or dependent on the skill of the surgeon. In any event, I was grateful my experience was different.

To inhibit bruising, Dr. Harley had suggested a couple of homeopathic remedies prior to the surgery — Arnica Montana pills and high enzyme foods like pineapple and

Lift continues on 10A ▶

Photo courtesy Nicole Harley

FOLLOW-UP — Beacon correspondent Mary Koppenheffer speaks with Dr. David Harley of Biltmore Plastic Surgery when she came to his office for a six-week follow up visit following her "Biltmore Lift."

LIFT

■ Continued from 1A

blueberries. I took Arnica beginning a few days before the procedure and continued for a full week. I also ate pineapple and blueberries the day of the procedure and for a few days afterwards. By day 10, I had absolutely no bruising at all and no need to do anything special with makeup.

A word of warning after a procedure — everyone who is aware you have had work will be very excited and eager to see how you look. As soon as I was out in public, I was asked to "model" my new uplifted face and talk about the procedure, pulling my hair behind my ears so friends could try to find scars (which they could not).

For the rest of the first week, I stayed close to home, continued to clean the incisions, and iced my face regularly. So far, it was pretty smooth sailing.

A week after the surgery, I want back for Dr. Harley to remove the stitches. While I still felt swollen, he took a profile picture and compared it to my "before" shot. It was great — exactly what I hoped for — from the side, no sagging skin — the jawline was very smooth. It was harder to see the results from a front shot, since the swelling made my face look wider.

Everything was going well until a couple of days after the stitches were removed. I mindlessly yanked a shirt over my head. The incision behind my left ear started bleeding. Ugh! I had ripped it open. I cleaned it up, but I had slowed down the healing time somewhat. Not too big a deal, but not what I wanted.

I continued to care for the incisions until they were entirely healed — about two weeks. Bruising was gone, but some swelling persisted, which is normal. It was the worst when I got up in the morning, and went down through the day. Since it is gravity-dependent, the specific area of my face that felt swollen changed by day.

At the end of three weeks, I felt healed enough to start jogging again in preparation for the San Francisco half marathon. At the end of a month, I resumed weight training.

And then, a setback. Of my own making. At the one month mark, just when I was feeling almost healed, I went backwards. During a weekend of family parties, I ate a lot of salty food — potato chips, for one. The swelling on my face increased, and I realized my food choices had been a big mistake.

I avoided processed food and salt for a couple of days, drank a lot of water, added some cranberry tea for good measure, and within a couple of days, the swelling was down to where it was before the Cape Cod Salt & Vinegar fiasco. The experience was an eye-opener as well. I could see what the salt was doing to my face. What was it doing to the rest of my body that I was not aware of?

If I don't tell people I've had a face and neck lift, they cannot tell. I was out of town recently visiting with friends and family, and no one had any idea I had just had plastic surgery. One friend asked, "you look great — what have you done?" Others commented on my hair or clothes — recognizing that something was different, but they had no idea it was a face lift.

About timing, I'm glad I did not have a trip or major event planned for at least four weeks after the procedure. While I looked just fine after two weeks, and no one else would notice the swelling, I still felt a bit "off," and it was not until four weeks that I felt back to normal and was not focused on my face all the time.

On the morning of the sixth week, I looked in the mirror and thought I looked good, but pretty much the same as always. Had it really been necessary to have a facelift? What a shock when I went to Dr. Harley that day for my six-week before-and-after photos. The changes were profound, but since the results were natural, I had already forgotten how I looked before the procedure. There's a very good chance those "before" shots may disappear from my inbox.

My face continues to be a bit swollen as my body completely recovers. The swelling has moved from alongside my ears to the chin line, as it gradually subsides. It may take a few months to be gone completely. Dr. Harley told me that he sees patients who had the procedure a year or more ago, and they continue to look better and better. That sounds great to me.

As for my half marathon training, I'm listening to my body, and some days I walk more than run. Seems like a small price to pay. I'll leave for San Francisco in a couple of weeks. My new goal for this race is just to finish comfortably, and to look pretty darn good in the women's 55-59 year old age group.

The physical results of the Biltmore Lift have exceeded my expectations, but I really didn't appreciate how great it would make me feel. Every time I look in the mirror, I feel younger. I don't see those sagging jowls or neck staring back at me. I think I'm smiling a bit more, too.

Although it may be trivialized in the national media, plastic surgery is still surgery. With research, planning, and a strong desire to make a change, it can be a wonderful experience, as I found out for myself.

Photographer / STAFF

BEFORE AND AFTER — Six weeks after the procedure, Mary Koppenheffer was able to see the changes that had taken place. As a result of the procedure, her jawline and upper neck were lifted and contoured to give a more youthful appearance. Photo credit: David Harley, M.D.