

Flaws in cosmetic-surgery tax proposal

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While we can all agree that ensuring children's health care should be a priority, the proposal by state Sen. Karen Keiser to tax cosmetic surgery and related procedures to fund state programs is the wrong prescription for an ailing system.

Beauty is more than skin deep and the superficial appeal of a cosmetic surgery tax belies the ugly truth of a fundamentally flawed policy. This new tax proposal is not only based upon erroneous assumptions, it is born out of political expediency rather than fiscal discipline.

Proponents point out that the tax is to be imposed only on procedures that are not "medically necessary." But such a determination is at times arbitrary. For example, Botox is frequently used to prevent migraine headaches, with the simultaneous benefit of wrinkle reduction. Hair transplants may be done for burn wounds to the scalp, and so on.

It is the diagnosis, not the treatment, that defines medical necessity. When the state, not your physician, determines what medical procedures may be taxed, what's next? How will patients' privacy be protected when the state audits your medical records? The potential administrative morass is enough to cause a migraine!

Keiser has said she thought people who could afford cosmetic surgery could afford to pay a little more. However, available data indicate otherwise.

Contrary to the popular belief that cosmetic surgery is the indulgence of the rich, most patients are middle income and seek it out for healthy reasons.

The tax would amount to several hundred dollars per surgical procedure, ample motivation for patients to travel out of state. In fact this is exactly what has happened in New Jersey, the only other state that has imposed a cosmetic surgery tax; estimates of revenue there have exceeded reality by 80 percent.

Keiser has also admitted the idea came to her while watching TV shows about the increasing popularity of plastic surgery. We suggest she spend less time watching TV and more time talking to those most affected. She might learn that children's health care needs will be best met by a tax policy that favors job growth and allows their parents to get off state assistance. The budget shortfall that spawned this proposal demonstrates an anemic job market and a faltering economy.

It is also worth noting that 86 percent of all cosmetic surgery procedures are performed on women. This new tax is not a simple thing that will be looked at by the country club set as another annoying little expense. Most cosmetic surgery patients are women who have saved hard and made tough financial decisions to afford these procedures. Imposing this on them now seems duplicitous punishment for making a personal decision to seek self-improvement.

Plastic surgeons are not simply cosmeticians with scalpels; we take call in emergency rooms and most plastic surgeons perform large amounts of charity care. But the unfortunate truth is that declining insurance reimbursement and skyrocketing malpractice insurance premiums mean that most plastic surgeons cannot sustain a practice doing only reconstructive surgery. As their cosmetic patients hop across the border to avoid the tax, some plastic surgeons will be forced to relocate, leaving their communities without access to care for cancer surgery reconstruction, trauma and burns. The very children the tax is supposed to help will end up losing out.

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