

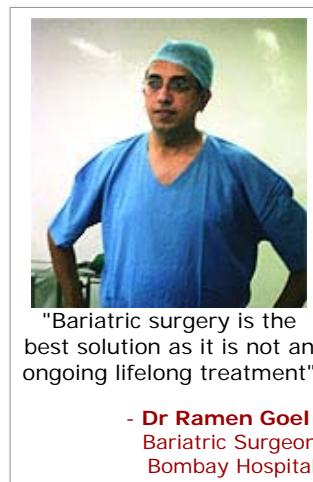
Think Slimmer, Think Bariatric

*Bariatric surgery is a beacon of hope for morbidly obese patients. But will it rake in the moolah for the Indian healthcare industry, asks **Nayantara Som***

Two years ago, 36-year-old Nirav Rijhwani, a hotelier from Ulhasnagar, Mumbai suffered from morbid obesity. Despite refraining from overeating, he weighed 140 kgs. To add to his woes, he had high blood pressure. Out of sheer desperation, he underwent cosmetic surgeries like liposuction and myriad forms of dieting and exercise. He did lose 20 kgs, but with the passage of time he gained weight again and came back to square one. "My distress ended only when I underwent a gastric bypass surgery. Two years later, I now weigh 91 kgs- a drop of 49 kgs. There are no restrictions in my life. My blood pressure is normal. I can now indulge in any kind of food," beams Rijhwani. He now gets a feeling of satiety and satisfaction even after having two chappatis. Rijhwani is not alone.

Anil Sharma (name changed), another hotelier from the city, weighed 143 kgs. Like Rijhwani, he tried dieting and was even under medication for one year. Hope came in the form of the gastric banding surgery, two months ago. "Now, I have lost eight kgs- a feat which I could not have achieved from one year of severe dieting and exercise. With my hectic schedule, I can now work for 15-16 hours with vigour and stamina without experiencing any form of fatigue," he says.

All this is courtesy the emerging techniques in bariatric surgery. Anil and Nirav are not the only people to experience the trauma of morbid obesity and reap the benefits of bariatric surgery. Morbid obesity has become a menace for millions of overweight people across the world. India alone accounts for 25 million people suffering from obesity with five million suffering from morbid obesity. It brings along with it a host of other diseases like diabetes, hypertension, cardio-vascular problems, gallbladder disease, menstrual irregularities, arthritis-joint pains, psycho-social problems and gastrointestinal disorders. These health effects can be disabling and demoralising for the patient, leading to further psychological problems. "Bariatric surgery is the best solution for the simple reason that unlike conventional methods like dieting, it is not an ongoing lifelong treatment and at the same time there is a significant loss in excessive weight with a simultaneous cure for a number of chronic diseases," points out Dr Ramen Goel, Consultant Laparoscopy and Bariatric Surgeon, Bombay Hospital and Medical Research Centre.



"Bariatric surgery is the best solution as it is not an ongoing lifelong treatment"

- **Dr Ramen Goel**
Bariatric Surgeon
Bombay Hospital



An obese patient from California operated by **Dr Shrihari Dhorepatil**

In the past five years, the number of people, both men and women, undergoing bariatric surgery in India is phenomenal. According to Dr Shrihari Dhorepatil, Consultant Bariatric Surgeon, Jehangir Apollo Hospital, Pune, who conducted the first bariatric surgery in the country, "When I started this surgery in 1998, people would snigger because they assumed that obesity did not exist in India. They were unaware that treatment like bariatric surgery existed at all. But gradually with globalisation, surgeons and the common people realised that obesity is a major issue in

India. After five years of performing bariatric surgical procedures, obese patients and other surgeons have started taking interest and are convinced about this surgery."

This surgery is gradually picking up in metropolitan cities because unlike rural or small towns, the percentage of obese people in the metros is comparatively higher. Dr Dhorepatil who is also the Honorary President of the Obesity Surgery Society of India, adds, "Back in 1998, I knew there was a lot of scope to this surgery. International doctors came to India because they knew India has a lot of potential. Gradually over the years bariatric surgery started picking up in the country."

Gone are the days when people would reluctantly force themselves into severe dieting and exercising and after resisting all temptations would manage to lose a meagre 8-10 kgs. "Bariatric surgery helps you eat the cake as well as have it. You get to lose all the extra fat in a jiffy and at the same time lead a normal and healthy life, otherwise not possible for these morbidly obese patients," adds Dr Dhorepatil, who also operates in PD Hinduja National Hospital, Mumbai

The Hot Seats

Cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai have become the hot seats for bariatric surgery. It is not just for Indian patients that this emerging surgery has become the latest obsession; people from all over the world flock to India, which is gradually becoming the Mecca for healthcare.

Bariatric experts get their patients from foreign countries. This in turn is good income not only for the Indian healthcare industry, but also for other industries directly or indirectly involved in the expansion of the medical tourism industry in the country. Surgeons like Dr P Chowbey, Chairman, Department of Minimal Access Surgery, Sri Gangaram Hospital, Delhi proudly point out that in a year he gets at least 100 cases which is quite an achievement considering that five years ago, bariatric surgery was unknown in the country. Dr Muffazal Lakdawala, Bariatric Surgeon, Dr LH Hiranandani Hospital, says, "After cardiac surgery, it is here to create waves in the country."

Factors To Be Considered Before Undertaking Surgery

Experts in the field are of the unanimous opinion that bariatric surgery is not suitable for all morbid obese patients. There are certain factors to be considered by both the doctor and the patient, such as the medical history of the patient, the BMI (Body Mass Index), and the psychiatric history of the patient. These factors are a pre-requisite and if neglected can have dangerous consequences. Dr Goel recalls, "I once had a patient who wanted to undergo the surgery. However her BMI was below 35 kg per m². So it was not possible for me to go ahead. Later however I found out that she was schizophrenic. I realised that more than bariatric treatment she needed to undergo psychiatric treatment." Dr Om Tantia, Bariatric Surgeon, ILS Multispeciality Clinic, Kolkata opines, "I always suggest intensive psychiatric counselling for the patient before the surgery. Sometimes it may so happen that a patient is not motivated to undergo a surgery. The motivation factor is very important. It is through this analysis that we can predict the success of surgery." Usually a patient with a BMI of less than 35 kg per m² is not operated on.

Dr Tantia adds, "A patient might have a hormonal or a metabolic problem, we then ensure that we treat this problem first and then go in for surgery." The other factors include age, sex of the patient, expectation of weight loss by the patient and the diet of the patient. The patient's sex is taken into consideration primarily because unlike a male patient, women go through three phases where there is increase in body weight- puberty, pregnancy and menopause. These cannot be ignored, as