



STORY BY  
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**TRANSGENDER  
SURGEON  
DR. SHERMAN LEIS**

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**THE PHILADELPHIA  
CENTER FOR  
TRANSGENDER**

THETRANSGENDERCENTER.COM

In a world of fast-paced living and an American's need for convenience, Sherman Leis, a Philadelphia-based plastic surgeon, has created a one-stop resource center for the transgender community. "I think our center is a good resource for transgender people," said Leis. "I get letters from people all around the world, and I answer all letters I get."

In 2004, Leis had a female resident apply for rotation within his practice. At the time, Leis was focusing his practice on plastic and reconstructive surgery. What he eventually found out was that this resident was prepared to dedicate her career to transgender surgery. "She asked me one day 'Why don't you do transgender surgeries?'" Leis said. That was something he hadn't considered in a very long time.

"When I was a young plastic surgeon in Philadelphia, I met a young lady transitioning to becoming a male," said Leis. "She was interested in having a genital reassignment procedure. I was familiar with the operation, so I read everything that was possible at the time. Very few doctors were doing the surgery at that time." Leis consumed literature regarding the procedure and after the patient passed a psychiatric evaluation and physical, he performed his first sex-reassignment surgery. "It went well and she was very happy," Leis said. "There was a lot of talk around that time, and I assumed that if I got a reputation that I might have trouble attracting patients for the usual aesthetic surgery. I just spent many years training in plastic and reconstructive surgery, I opted not to pursue sex-reassignment any further. I developed a more general plastic surgery practice."

And that's how it continued until 2004 when this resident came around asking questions. "I told her about my concerns," Leis said. "She told me I didn't have to worry about that anymore. She said 'Transgender people need high level surgeons who do this work.' That many patients go out of the country for the

surgery, to Canada, Mexico, Europe, and Thailand. I realized that I could be a help to this community—they're very discriminated against, even in the medical community."

Again, Leis began consuming information, this time with much more literature and many more doctors to learn from. Leis attended lectures, read journals, visited private practices, and observed surgeries before beginning to operate in his own practice. "I got the lay of the land and learned about the politics of the trans community," said Leis. "For the last couple of years I've been traveling and giving speeches to transgender meetings across the country. I'm pretty plugged in to the community now."

In 2005, Leis founded The Philadelphia Center for Transgender Surgery. Leis continued to provide general plastic and reconstructive surgery, but transgender surgery has now become the major part of his practice. "Transgender surgery has just about taken over my practice," Leis said. "I do several surgeries a week."

Even though Leis is a trained surgeon, the center works to provide a lot more to the transgender community. "My aspect of it is that I'm a resource for people who want to transition," said Leis. "We have endocrinologists who monitor their hormone treatment.

We have family medicine, fashion consultants, lawyers to handle discrimination issues. We can help them finish, or begin from the very start."

Looking at the list of professionals who work on the transgender team, it seems like they have covered everything—electrolysis, internal medicine, general medicine, general surgery, gynecology, hair transplant, hair removal, legal assistance, permanent cosmetics, estheticians, day spas, plastic surgery, psychiatry, voice therapy and urology.

"My practice is now a combination of trans and non trans," Leis said. The center specializes in medicine for the trans community—whether it directly relates to the transition, or whether it's for an annual check-up. The center works to eliminate the discriminatory feelings transgender individuals may encounter from a general medical community.

Opening his doors so widely to the transgender community has brought up some hurdles for Leis and the center. "The hospital that I originally started doing these surgeries at closed down," Leis said. "I've had to change hospitals three or four times in the last four years. A lot of the institutions won't let me do the surgeries at their hospitals. A Catholic hospital that I'm a member of won't let me do the surgeries. They won't let me bring a transgender patient in for any surgery because they feel that it might be a staging operation towards gender reassignment, which could create a scandal for the archdiocese."

Leis has been turned down by at least four hospitals. When a doctor applies at a hospital to use their surgical facilities, the requests go through a credentials committee. Leis says he imagines a group of aging white men in a room making the decisions who are not aware of the contemporary surgeries going on in

the world. "They're all crazy," Leis said. "That's the conservative people, religious people who think it's against God's will."

For an aging, white doctor, Leis is on the forefront of that contemporary medicine wave. When he talks about being denied by hospitals, he emotes a sense of passion. "Legally it's going to be changed," Leis says.

The first step as Leis sees it is from the insurance companies. "Little by little, insurance companies are paying for transgender surgery. The Ford Motor Company, IBM, Cisco, and Microsoft pay higher premiums so their employees and their families can have transgender surgery. It's coming into acceptance, from insurance companies and hospitals. I see this happening, sometimes they have to be sued, but legally they have to accept it. It should be covered like any other medical entity."

The insurance companies are apprehensive to cover transgender surgeries because they tend to be expensive, but the center doesn't hide how much it will cost a patient. Their Web site offers the costs for dozens of medical procedures available to transgender patients – those relating directly to transitioning such as "bottom" surgery and others that can make someone's face seem more feminine or masculine.

It's this sense of forthright information and resources that the center seems to specialize in. The center remains discreet and professional, but they also are open to answering questions and referring people to other understanding professionals who can assist them.

Leis feels that being a resource is how the center can best service the transgender community, especially in a time when trans issues are hitting mainstream. "With all the media attention, transgender issues are common now," Leis said. "Oprah, Larry King, Barbara Walters, major movies, all on trans subjects and the internet itself is spreading information. Loads of people see all this information now; more people are made aware of trans community and issues. Little by little, it will become more acceptable and tolerant, less biased, less discriminatory and people will learn about other communities that are different."

But it isn't just the general public being more aware, it's also transgender people who are becoming aware of their options. "The community sees there are other people out there like them not afraid to transition," said Leis. "That person is just like me, they transitioned and I can do the same thing."

The number of people transitioning and those being public about their transition is increasing, but Leis seems to have the numbers to correspond with the trend. "I have a patient who's a statistician and she has just published a paper in a scientific journal that shows the number of people coming out and requesting treatment will double every four to five years," Leis said. "You heard very little about it when I started my practice. The number of letters I receive from people who are aware of trans issues is increasing. Hospitals and insurance companies and lawyers will have to become aware of it."