

# Spin doctor

N.Y. firm promotes UI surgery needed after weight loss

By Tom Walsh

The Gazette

IOWA CITY — A team of University of Iowa plastic surgeons has hired a New York public relations firm to spread the word nationally about a surgical procedure being described by the PR firm as "a body lift."

KMR Communications, which bills itself as a "boutique" agency that specializes in wooing national media coverage of health, beauty and fitness issues, has been busy encouraging print and broadcast reporters to do stories on "belt lipectomy" surgery performed at University Hospitals by surgeons Al Cram and Al Aly.

Aly characterizes the PR effort as a "public service" to spread word of the procedure that removes pounds of flesh folds from patients who have undergone significant weight loss.

Aly said candidates for the elective surgery include patients who have lost 70 to 300 pounds as a result of gastric bypass, or stomach-stapling, surgery, which was pioneered at University Hospitals in 1966

Turn to 10A: **Surgery**

**Squeezing the stomach**  
The gastric band is like the middle of an hourglass, essentially dividing the stomach into upper and lower parts. After implantation, a small amount of food fills the top of the stomach and keeps the recipient feeling full for longer periods, dramatically reducing food intake.

A doctor can tighten or loosen the band by inflating or deflating the hollow connection tubing, which is filled with fluid.

Access port (placed under the skin in a muscle in the chest wall)

Hollow tube

Gastric band

Access part

Esophagus

Gastric

Hollow tube

Gastric

**Major loss leaves major problem: Skin**

ANN ARBOR — As stories of dramatic weight reduction from weight-loss surgery increase, so will plastic surgery to remove excess abdominal skin.

Few insurance companies are paying for the procedure, known as "abdominoplasty," because it is viewed as "cosmetic" rather than an ailment.

Known more commonly as a "tummy tuck," the operation removes excess folds of skin around the abdomen created when the patient was obese.

Another type of surgery starting to take hold, specifically for patients who have lost large amounts of weight — 125 pounds and up — is a "belt lipectomy," a sort of "mega" tummy tuck. The surgeon removes the excess skin from the belly first by making an incision, stretching the skin downward toward the pelvis and suturing it in place. Then, the patient is turned on his or her side, and the skin is pulled down on the sides and middle back as well.

An estimated 75,000 people are expected to have one or the other this year. And as the number of weight-loss surgeries triples over the next few years to well over 100,000 annually, the rate of stomach tucks and skin removal will rise as well.

"It may seem amusing at first, but the medical difficulties associated with loose, baggy skin following tremendous weight loss can be serious," says Al Cram, the University of Iowa Division of Plastic Surgery.

Rashes and sores can form in the skin folds, as well as intense pain and stretching from the sheer weight of the skin.

From discomfort, Cram says, many patients are discouraged over the sight of excess skin as they were over the weight itself.

Sue Barr, a 46-year-old administrative assistant in Las Vegas, has gone from 500 pounds to 167 pounds in four years. She has had two skin-tuck surgeries — a tummy tuck as well as surgery to deal with the folds of skin on her thighs and upper arms.

Barr says her body has been "like a Sharpei" since she lost her weight.

— Al Cram, University of Iowa

**"The medical difficulties associated with loose, baggy skin following tremendous weight loss can be serious."**

At least two major

How long is the

Spinning of 'CSI'

USA TODAY

5 reasons Duncan is the MVP

It's about time: Nasdaq enjoys biggest gain in a year

Suit over cabin air quality could change the industry

Israeli Cabinet votes to retaliate

Church standoff winding down

Photo illustration by Mark Kimball

A story in USA Today describes belt lipectomy surgery. UI Hospitals is one of the few places in the United States where this type of plastic surgery is performed.

# Surgery: Doctor says UI surpasses its few competitors

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by Dr. Ed Mason.

KMR is working for UI Hospitals under an open-ended, month-to-month contract that includes a \$3,500 monthly retainer.

Aly said the contract is being funded from fees paid to the Plastic Surgery Division of the Department of Surgery by private patients who undergo elective cosmetic surgeries.

The agency's efforts over the past three months have resulted in placement of stories in media outlets as diverse as USA Today and the supermarket checkout-line tabloid The Star.

"Belt lipectomy is somewhat unique to us," Aly said. "There are only three places that do it in this country, and we feel we do it best.

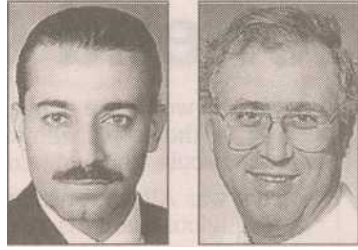
"There's a backlog of patients who have lost significant amounts of weight, but still look fat because of hanging, excess tissue.

"I would say that 95 percent of the plastic and general surgeons who do this body contouring surgery only do the front, which leaves patients with a Shar-Pei dog look. We go all the way around, which takes the body from something quite unnatural to a realm of normalcy."

Aly said recruiting KMR made sense because most people who can benefit from belt lipectomy learn about it through word of mouth, not from their doctors.

"Nationally, most people don't know this procedure exists," he said. "To educate those who would benefit most, we must get some coverage in the national media.

"The marketing people here



Dr. Al Aly Dr. Al Cram  
UI surgeons offer belt lipectomy

(at University Hospitals) do a wonderful job locally, but they don't have the national contacts required to reach a national audience."

The decision to hire a Big Apple PR firm came as a surprise to the hospitals' in-house marketing and communications staff.

"It was an agreement they made independent of us," said Stacy McGauvran-Hruby, the director of marketing at University Hospitals. "Apparently they feel that what they are trying to accomplish is beyond our efforts and resources."

## Agency publicizes rarities

Katherine Rothman, the president of KMR Communications, said her firm's clients include other teaching hospitals and private physician groups. Citing confidentiality agreements, Rothman declined to name them.

"We tend to focus on the more serious and hard-hitting medical issues that make good human interest stories," she said.

"We're not doing this to promote a common plastic surgery procedure like a nose job. If someone in New York wants a nose job, they don't need to

travel to Iowa.

"Our point is not to put Iowa on the map, but we do understand that, if people need help with a serious enough medical condition, they will travel to find the best care."

Rothman said she works with other physicians who, like Aly and Cram, have access to in-house public relations expertise but still opt to hire an independent agency as well.

"Many of our clients in New York and L.A. can make use of public relations people in their hospitals," she said. "But, to increase the volume of coverage they receive, they feel they have to turn to an agency like ours."

Rothman said the fees her firm charges vary from client to client, depending on the marketing objective. Although she declined to specify fees, the retainers involved range from \$3,500 to- \$10,000 a month.

In addition to promoting belt lipectomy surgery, KMR has begun circulating press releases about surgical treatment offered at University Hospitals for gynecomastia, a hormonal imbalance that causes breast enlargement in men, a condition Aly also treats.

"We'll take a release and target it at every appropriate media outlet, and, once it runs its course, we'll move onto something else," Rothman said.

Aly said he and Cram are now teaming to do one belt lipectomy a month. The cost of the elective surgery varies from patient to patient, but ranges from \$8,000 to \$10,000.