

A Denver surgeon offers a solution for people tired of sweating and grunting their way to rippled abs



Photos by Andy Gress | The Denver Post

Dr. John Millard performs "liposculpture" on John O'Brien, 39, of Denver at the Centennial Health Care Plaza on Jan. 18. The procedure removes fat and enhances underlying muscle structure.

INSTANT SIX-PACK

By Marsha Austin Denver Post Staff Writer

Forget about sweating through endless crunches in what — face it — is probably a hopeless quest for rock-hard and rippled "six-pack" abdominals reserved for bodybuilders and the genetically gifted.

Throw in the towel and whip out the wallet.

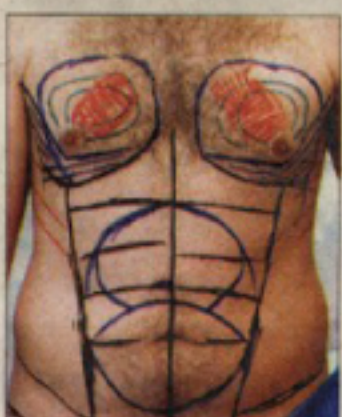
A Denver plastic surgeon, Dr. John Millard, is pioneering a technique for those willing to pay for perfection: muscle-bound torsos sculpted from the patient's own fat.

"This is art," Millard said during a recent surgery. "If he could have done this, Michelangelo would have been a surgeon."

Millard in late 2005 learned the procedure from a Colombian artist-turned-surgeon, Dr. Alfredo Hoyos, and has performed 19 of the "high-definition liposuction" surgeries. The surgeons claim to be the first in the world to take America's most popular cosmetic procedure — liposuction — from slimming technique to extreme muscle sculpture.

Patients opting for the \$8,000 to \$15,000 operation typically are within 10 to 15 pounds of their ideal body weight but frustrated by aging bodies that no longer respond as quickly or dramatically to exercise, he said.

"They put so much effort into show-



Patient John O'Brien is outlined before undergoing his fat-removing procedure.

ing what's under that fat and skin. ... They've earned it," said Millard.

John O'Brien, 39, came to see Millard after going through what he described as a painful divorce. O'Brien, a recruiter for a medical-device company, said

> See SURGERY on 4A

SURGERY: Still, patients will have to work out and watch what they eat

CONTINUED FROM 1A

he hit the gym four days a week and ran regularly but couldn't get rid of his stubborn belly fat.

He said he chose surgery to boost his self-esteem and maintain a competitive edge he felt he was losing with age. A week after his operation, O'Brien, whose girlfriend used to teasingly pinch his fat, said his confidence level had multiplied tenfold.

"I will be wearing a Red Sox cap and thong to mow my lawn," O'Brien said.

Sound waves zap fat

Instant abdominals are not a license to quit the gym and start pigging out. A patient who gains a significant amount of weight after surgery will lose the definition, said Millard.

"All bets are off," he said. Karl Sellers, 44, a self-described exercise "die-hard" and Millard's first patient, said she's eaten more healthfully since her December surgery.

"This is for the person who really takes care of themselves," Sellers says.

Since the early 1980s, plastic surgeons have used liposuction to rid body-conscious clients of unwanted fat, smoothing out problem spots like love-handles, waist and saddle-bagged thighs. In the early days the fat was sucked out through a tube. Now, many doctors, including Millard, zap fat cells with sound waves, which destroys them, leaving less to pull from the body.

Traditional liposuction can accentuate muscles previously hidden by fat and in the late 1990s some plastic surgeons began performing "abdominal etching" to impart fat with the look of a super-toned tummy.

But Millard and Hoyos say they are the only surgeons enhancing with fat patients' exact underlying muscle structure, and sculpting their work to create definition in men's pectorals and women's buttocks. The pair also is experimenting with liposculpture of the arms and legs, Millard said.

The surgical techniques would not be possible without recent advances in liposuction tools that allow for much more precise fat-cell removal, he added.

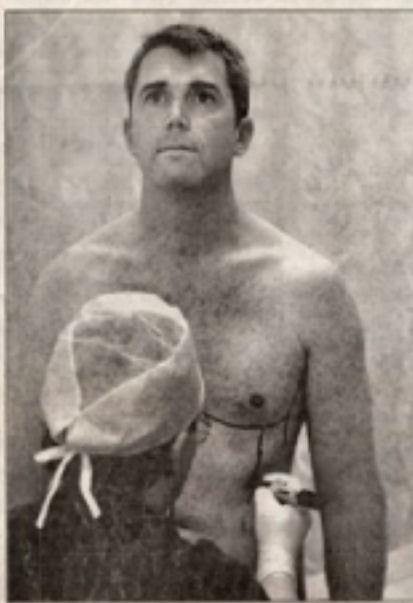
Colorado physician William Ginsler got Food and Drug Administration approval in 2004 for a surgical device that uses ultrasound waves to break up fat tissue without damaging nearby nerves and connective tissue. Ginsler said he originally began working with ultrasound waves as a way to attack pediatric brain tumors.

Why not just work out? "Most of us don't have that luxury or time ... and most of us retain fat," said Millard. "I've done surgeries on marathon runners who can't get rid of their love handles."

Alas, the fat is still there

Despite technological advances, liposculpture is still a medical procedure and should not be treated with the same casual attitude as a visit to a cosmetic counter, a mistake many patients make, said Virginia Blum, University of Kentucky professor and author of "Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery."

Blum said the concept of going under the knife to create fake



Andy Gress | The Denver Post

Dr. John Millard uses a Sharpie to outline patient John O'Brien before surgery to remove stubborn belly fat and enhance his natural abdominal muscles. "I will be wearing a Red Sox cap and thong to mow my lawn," he said.

muscles from fat shows just how out of touch Americans are with reality and the risks of surgery.

"The idea that you could turn the bad thing into a good thing, it's like all those potato chips floating up in your six pack instead of going to your thighs," said Blum. "For the look of health they are putting their body in danger."

Millard said the technique and tools he uses have reduced pain, swelling, bruising and excessive bleeding, all symptoms of older liposuction techniques.

Liposuction has become a quick and relatively painless fix for many aging Americans. Nearly half of all cosmetic plastic-surgery patients are between 35 and 50, with liposuction ranking No. 1 for the age group, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

And demand is rising. In 2004, liposuction was the most common of all cosmetic plastic surgeries, with 246,704 Americans paying for the body-slimming procedure.

Buff, but not really

"I don't think people realize how difficult it is when you turn 40," said O'Brien, whose abdominal surgery took about four hours. O'Brien arrived at Centennial Medical Plaza's day-surgery center at 7 a.m. on Jan. 18.

Standing naked by his bed, he flexed as Millard drew with multicolored markers the lines where he would sculpt O'Brien's new "muscles."

Just after 9 a.m., in the operating room, Millard made several small incisions under O'Brien's nipples and along his torso. Those would be the only cuts he would make.

Millard inserted a foot-long metal tube called a cannula under O'Brien's skin and began moving it back and forth like a tiny vacuum.

Soon O'Brien's love handles were disappearing, then, about two hours later, his pectoral muscles emerged as Millard continued to move his metal tool under the skin.

By lunch, Millard was "sculpting" O'Brien's abdominals from the fat deposits he'd left.

"It's as important what I leave behind as what I take," he said. "I'm sculpting from the inside out."

That night, a groggy O'Brien was back home. Six days later he was back at work and amazed at what had emerged from his somewhat bruised and swollen post-surgical body.

"It's unbelievable," he said. "I feel like I'm looking at one of those gladiator costumes, with those plastic chest plates, or a Batman costume."

He had little exposure in the United States — Millard and Hoyos are hosting the first lecture on their work this weekend in Denver — and it has its skeptics.

Dr. Gerald Pitman, clinical associate professor of surgery at New York University School, said one of the biggest problems with abdominal-etching techniques is that patients often are left looking unnatural.

"I always felt I got better results by reducing the fat smoothly and letting the patient's own musculature show through," Pitman said.

Sellers said her post-surgical physique looks more real to her than what nature provided. "My abdomen just didn't match the rest of my body," Sellers said. "I am a really small person and I work out five days a week, two hours at a time, and I eat really well. No matter what I did, I couldn't get rid of my stomach."

High-definition liposculpture

It is a technique different from traditional liposuction, which not only removes fat but surrounding nerves, connective tissue and blood. Liposculpture leaves a majority of surrounding tissue undisturbed, promoting smooth, sharply results and aiding in faster recovery.

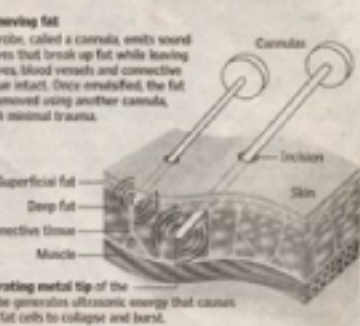
Areas of unwanted fat

Doctors identify areas where fat should be removed and where muscle will be sculpted by retaining fat.



Removing fat

A probe, called a cannula, emits sound waves that break up fat while leaving nerves, blood vessels and connective tissue intact. Once emulsified, the fat is removed using another cannula, with minimal trauma.



The surgery

Incisions are made near the fat-removal sites. Next, a fluid is injected to aid in the separation of skin from fat and to help protect the patient from the heat of the ultrasonic cannula. Once the bulk of deep fat has been removed, a thin layer of superficial fat is sculpted to create definition and a muscular appearance.

Where fat is removed Where fat is retained and sculpted over respective muscle



Sculpting superficial fat

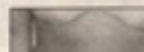
Once the superficial fat layer is removed, the connective tissue causes the skin to contract closer to the muscle. With a smaller cannula, the surgeon creates definition by further removing selected areas of superficial fat and blending it into the retained fat over the sculpted muscle.

Source: John G. Mitchell, MD



Group P. Walker | The Denver Post

Left is how Karl Sellers' stomach looked before "liposculpture" surgery by Dr. John Millard.



Right is how Karl Sellers' stomach looked after surgery.



Photos by Karl Sellers

Let's see how Karl Sellers' stomach looked before "liposculpture" surgery by Dr. John Millard. Sellers, of Arvada, was Millard's first patient using the procedure. Above, Sellers, 44, pumps iron at home. A self-described exercise "die-hard," she says she's eaten more healthfully since her December surgery. "This is for the person who really takes care of themselves," she says. She reports that she is still a little swollen and has some bruising to show.