

Surgical training was cosmetic, plaintiffs allege in class action

By **MAX MADDISON**, JOURNALIST

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When Brittany Johnson arrived at the hospital with a sharp pain in her right breast, she felt as though her chest was about to burst.

In April last year, five years after the 29-year-old underwent cosmetic surgery at The Cosmetic Institute, she raced to the emergency department, worried that she couldn't raise her right arm; her breast had doubled in size.

Ms Johnson is just one of thousands of women who underwent cosmetic surgery at one of TCI's "factories" across NSW and Queensland, in what she describes as a "production line" of young "naive" women such as herself, fooled by glitzy marketing on the company's social media, and ostensibly low cost.

The Cosmetic Institute and director Eddy Dona are facing a class action from more than 1000 women, including Ms Johnson. The company is alleged to have allowed general doctors with little-to-no surgical training to undertake procedures.

Ms Johnson said it was "ridiculous" such conduct could happen in Australia. "I was another dollar figure," she said. "I didn't have that time to sit on it and think. It was like give me your deposit. Let's get in there and get it done."

It was only after a consultation with plastic surgeon Amira Sanki that the executive assistant realised the extent of the issue: her right breast had filled up with 550ml of fluid, part of a "waterfall deformity". The initial surgery had been botched, done by someone with allegedly one weekend of surgical training. Her "cosmetic surgeon" was Van Nguyen, one of 10 medical practitioners with

limited surgical qualifications who operated on women like Ms Johnson, under the supervision of registered plastic surgeon Mr Dona.

Sitting in Dr Sanki's consultation room in Kogarah, in Sydney's south, Ms Johnson has spent the past year preparing for corrective surgery to repair the damage. While the initial surgery cost \$5999, the eventual bill will be in excess of \$20,000. But Ms Johnson said she was one of the lucky ones.

Court documents allege one patient, Kylie Pollock, suffered four seizures after undergoing breast augmentation surgery at the hands of Dr Nguyen in 2014, while another, Amy Rickhuss, needed to be resuscitated after undergoing surgery in 2015. Dr Dona and Dr Nguyen deny any wrongdoing.

Dr Sanki said she sees at least one woman a month who has undergone inappropriate surgery.

Each "cosmetic surgeon" allegedly paid the clinic \$500,000 over three years to perform the breast augmentation surgeries. Despite the outlay, each doctor was able to turn a profit by taking a cut of each procedure.

Sally Gleeson, a solicitor with Turner Freeman Lawyers, which is bringing the class action, said. "It's disappointing that the industry is not regulated. Anyone who completes medical school with basic training can go ahead and operate. Surely that needs to be addressed."

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