

Skin Deep: Exploring Cosmetic Dermatology

by Cynthia Close

Given the overall aging of baby boomer women, it was not surprising when cosmetics giant L'Oréal announced in early 2016 that 69-year-old Susan Sarandon would be the new “face of L'Oréal.” Interestingly, while she does use some of the company's products, she also thanks her healthy diet and lifestyle for her youthful complexion, and on the L'Oréal website is quoted as saying: “Really it's about eating proper fruits and vegetables, drinking lots of water and—most importantly—not smoking cigarettes.” Possibly because of this swelling demographic of aging women, a bit of a sea change is detectable in this youth-obsessed culture, where attempting to look perpetually young, or at least under age 40, has been the gold standard. Among the astounding plethora of skincare products promoting anti-aging is a quiet but growing pro-aging movement, whose proponents encourage women to embrace aging rather than trying to defy it—by letting the hair go gray, not opting for cosmetic procedures, and using minimal makeup. This tendency to acknowledge that beauty really is more than skin deep seems to be an accurate reflection of the attitudes not only of baby boomer women as they age but also of the typical Vermont woman. It all ties into the holistic idea of healthy living that so many made-in-Vermont products and services have built into their identity. That said, few of us, male or female, are immune to the temptation of finding ways to turn the clock back—at least a bit. And cosmetic surgery and other less invasive procedures are still tempting, especially since technology has made significant advances in recent years, cutting back on both the risk factors as well as the healing time.

Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery

Dr. David Leitner, one of Vermont's top plastic surgeons, has acknowledged the statistics indicating Vermont women are far less likely to resort to cosmetic surgery than, say, those living in Los Angeles, Miami, or other more urban areas. Leitner, who specializes in breast reconstruction, cleft lip and palate surgery, microvascular reconstructive surgery, and facial fracture surgery, along with facial and body cosmetic surgery, practices at UVM Medical Center. He emphasizes the importance of taking the time to develop the doctor-patient relationship. Trust is paramount when submitting yourself to any kind of surgery, and when the results have the power to change how the world sees you, as in facial reconstruction or augmentation, it is a necessity.

Finding Reliable Providers

While Leitner is surrounded by the gravitas that practicing in a large and respected medical center offers, other purveyors of “beauty through chemistry” have chosen to present their services in a quasi-medical environment, with the term “medical” often appearing in their names. The obvious intent is to put clients at ease by suggesting that the spas are staffed by competent, knowledgeable professionals offering an easy and pain-free approach to achieving a more youthful appearance,

If major plastic surgery is not an option, a number of products and procedures are available, promising a better-looking, younger, healthier-looking face, among them: removing fatty deposits from under the skin, injecting additional material under the skin, injecting wrinkle relaxers, abrading or removing layers of skin either mechanically or chemically, topical application of products that are absorbed through the skin, and, finally, simply artfully covering problem areas with makeup.

I confess I'm of the opinion if it sounds too good to be true, it may indeed not be true, so I approach all claims of age-defying products or processes with a healthy dose of skepticism. Though it isn't possible for a journalist doing research in this arena to submit herself as a patient or client to all the businesses offering everything just shy of a full-blown facelift, it is possible to present a cross-section of options for elective procedures done for aesthetic reasons here in Vermont.

Assessments can be made based on the image these spas and centers project through their own advertising or by checking the many websites where services are evaluated, like the Better Business Bureau, YELP, RealSelf, and HealthGrades.com. The trail of opinions and rankings left on these sites may help to create a clearer picture of the services provided, or in some cases, it may muddy the waters. Perhaps the best advice might come from a trusted friend who has had positive results from a particular doctor or aesthetician you are considering.

Cutting-Edge Procedures

A number of Vermont businesses advertising skin care services, facials, massage, and so on are scattered in and around Stowe, Montpelier, or Rutland, but those offering cutting-edge medical and cosmetic procedures are clustered in or near Burlington in close proximity to the University of Vermont Medical Center.

Dorset Street Dermatology in South Burlington, run by Dr. Mitchell Schwartz, offers a range of services, from chemical peels to body sculpting and facial contouring. Schwartz's business is not listed as accredited with the Vermont Better Business Bureau nor is there any information about his practice, positive or negative, on that site, but he has a very active file on www.realself.com, a website dedicated to people nationwide either considering cosmetic surgery, or those who have had surgery or treatments. Fortunately, all of Schwartz's reviews were given a five-star rating, along with the names and statements of those folks who had a positive experience under his care. What I found a bit disconcerting about Schwartz was his connection to the pharmaceutical companies who make the products he specializes in using, such as Radiesse, an injectable that plumps up the skin. Schwartz is a member of the Medical Education Faculty for Merz, the makers of Radiesse, and in the case of Botox, the well-known neurotoxin that smoothes skin by paralyzing facial muscles, Dorset Street Dermatology Medical Spa has achieved "Platinum Level" and is one of the largest Botox injectors in New England.

Women-Run Businesses

I was most encouraged by the fact that the other successful medical spas that I reviewed were all run by women. MD Cosmetics Medical Spa in Williston is owned by Erin Jewel, an aesthetician with an unusual background as a navy helicopter mechanic. Not exactly what you'd expect in a spa owner.

Although MD Cosmetics does have Dr. Colleen Parker on staff as its medical professional, it has more of a salon feel, then a clinic. This perception is reinforced by Jennifer Obarski, the head aesthetician and makeup artist. She was a previous member of the Vermont Makeup Artist Guild, has over 10 years of experience in bridal and everyday makeup application, and has had success specializing in makeup application on women with aging skin. The spa tends to specialize in the cosmetic approach, with an emphasis on laser hair removal on both face and body, tattoo removal, and makeup consulting. While Jivana Holistic Spa in Burlington does not have any medical personal on staff, it does emphasize the therapeutic healing approach to beauty. Their name, Jivana is a Sanskrit word meaning "the rejuvenating effect of water" which they indicate is the basis for their treatments. Yoga practitioners will feel particularly at home in Jivana's Asian inspired environment with their foundation in traditional naturopathy, Ayurvedic and European spa processes. In fact they are in the same building with Yoga Vermont. They offer a wide range of facials, with an emphasis on cleansing and relaxation as well as whole body massage and specialty services such as the Far Infrared Sauna and organic waxing.

Skin Deep Medical Aesthetics in Essex Junction has one of the most professional-looking websites, and what I most liked about it was that it posted a menu of procedures with anticipated pricing, which is tremendously helpful in assessing what is affordable. None of the other medical spas was this transparent. Run by a staff of three experienced physicians, which included Dr. Maria G. Carracino, Dr. Paula Miner, and Dr. Paula A. Flaherty, this trio, with their impressive résumés, medical degrees, and board certifications, induced a feeling of confidence and likeability, suggested by their smiling, healthy faces. Their photos indicated that they practiced what they preached. I also learned about CareCredit from their website. Many standard health insurance policies do not cover elective procedures, or anything labeled "cosmetic." CareCredit is a health-care credit card designed for your health, beauty, and wellness needs. It's a way to pay for the costs of many treatments and procedures and allows you to make convenient monthly payments. It seems fair and does not charge any interest if payments are made on schedule.

Lumina, a medical spa in South Burlington run by Dr. Nancy Carlson, seems to offer the widest range of both health-care and aesthetic products and services. I liked the fact that her emphasis appears to be on the health-care side for women of all ages, so as a mother I would feel comfortable bringing an adolescent daughter in for menstruation issues or acne problems. Carlson's assistant, Lisa Kelley, is a board-certified nurse practitioner with 29 years experience in women's health care. She provides comprehensive care to women of all ages, including young women transitioning from pediatric to adult health services and women of childbearing age, as she was previously a nurse midwife. As with Leitner, Carlson is associated with the UVM Medical Center, and a large part of her

practice at Lumina is dedicated to providing comprehensive gynecologic services. On the salon/spa side, Lumina offers some delicious sounding experiences like the HydraFacial, a nonsurgical resurfacing procedure that promises immediately effective results. For women like myself who are a little squeamish about injecting themselves with foreign substances like Botox, this is an interesting alternative.

The Trouble with Injectables

Dr. Carlson, like some of the other medical aesthetic practitioners mentioned in this article, does offer a broad range of injectables, including Botox. Their product names include Restylane Silk, which is designed specifically for plumping the lips and softening fine lines around the mouth, Belotero Balance, a dermal filler targeting those often deep nasolabial folds or “smile lines,” and Xeomin and Dysport, which are used as alternatives to Botox.

The main issue I see with injectables is that the visual improvement and more youthful appearance obtained with their use is only temporary, the effects lasting at most six months, if you’re lucky. Once you’ve made the plunge into Botox territory, you must keep up the treatments, or give in to the process of aging. A majority of Vermont women seem to have opted for this inevitability. But with the help of a positive attitude, healthy lifestyle, and an occasional rejuvenating facial, we can all turn a more beautiful face toward the world.