Incorporating a Medical Spa into a Physician-Run Practice

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HISTORY OF THE SPA

DeVierville1 proposed that the modern word “spa” came into the English language via the old Walloon word, “espa,” which means fountain, and which in English became “spaw.” It is difficult to pinpoint the actual origin of the first spa and spa treatments. The concept of the spa occurred in Europe and Asia where mineral springs and thermal mud were used to soothe and heal varying ailments.2 During the Roman Empire 1352 public fountains and 962 public baths were available to the citizens of Rome.3 After exercising, bathers entered the “warm room” to acclimate to the subsequent “hot room.” After the hot room, patrons would undergo an oiling massage and then plunge into a cold pool.3 Roman soldiers sought hot baths to recuperate after long battles. The baths were referred to as “aqua,” and the bathing treatments were known as “sanus per aquam” (SPA), that is, “health through water.”

After the fall of the Roman Empire, establishments with “hot rooms” disintegrated, but the concept of the spa flourished with continued use of the major springs. Despite the Church’s disapproval of bathing, and use of such springs continued. In Renaissance Italy, the “taking of waters” was associated with gentlemanly ideal of a rustic retreat.3

In France and Germany, people frequented spas to improve medical ailments ranging from renal disorders and infertility to paralysis and seizure disorders. The Belgian town of Spa became famous for the healing powers of its mineral hot springs during the fourteenth century. It became a place to be restored and pampered and still exists today.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries many prominent figures supported the use of spa waters for treating varying ailments. Leonardo de Vinci used the waters at San Pellegrino. Michel de Montaigne was relieved when the spring waters stimulated passage of a kidney stone. Charles Darwin improved his dyspepsia with a combination of wet sheet packing, hot air baths, and showers.3

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the use of mineral springs and the development of hotels and boarding houses around the vicinity of natural springs propelled the popularity of the spa. Transplanted Europeans and North Americans learned about the healing properties of waters from Native Americans, and they developed resorts or health retreats. Some early retreats such as Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania, White Sulfur Springs, West Virginia, and Hot Springs, Arkansas became household names rivaling the renowned spas of Europe.4

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of the founding fathers of dermatology, among them Ferdinand von Hebra and Louis Dühring, discussed the importance in hydration and bathing for the treatment of psoriasis, ichthyosis, and pemphigus.4 Through the early twentieth century, the great spas of North American and Europe were popular destinations for the wealthy as well as the ill, who went there to rejuvenate and recuperate. As health care became nationalized and

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modern medicine became more efficient, however, the popularity of spas began to decline.

In the latter part of the twentieth century and continuing to the present, spas re-emerged as destination resorts and places for health maintenance as a complement to modern medicine. The resurgence in the popularity of the spa sprung from the growing depersonalization of the modern health care system and from a greater emphasis on wellness and preventive medicine. Over time, spas became destination locales for health maintenance.

Three major markers delineate the evolution of the spa industry in the United States. In the 1940s Rancho La Puerta in Tecate, Mexico, focused on a return to nature and minimalism and emphasized healthy eating and fitness. In the 1950s the Golden Door in southern California developed intimate, small centers of pampering and relaxation. In 1979 the Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Arizona integrated health and healing into the models pioneered by Rancho La Puerta and The Golden Door. Traditional spas now are oriented toward providing pampering and beauty treatments such as massages and facials and serving as relaxation centers for the wealthy. As such, the popular modern spa descends from the ancient practice of bathing in hot springs and mineral waters.

**EMERGENCE OF THE MEDICAL SPA**

Despite the advances and evolution of the spa, patients and clinicians recognized the lack of true medical benefits from typical spa treatments such as facials, body treatments, and skin care products. The advent of topical dermatologic agents with proven anti-aging and therapeutic effects, as well as new technologies to treat medical conditions with minimal downtime paved the way for the emergence of medical spas. The concept of one-stop shopping for both credible spa treatments and prescription-grade medications appeals to a large segment of the population.

Medications that have demonstrated anti-aging properties include retinoids, alpha- and beta-hydroxy acids, 5-fluorouracil, and chemical peels. Modalities that have a central role in aesthetic-based medicine include laser hair removal, vascular lasers, laser photo rejuvenation, injectable fillers, chemical sclerosants, and chemical denervating agents. These tools are available to the well-trained physician, require virtually no downtime, and can augment the services available in a traditional spa dramatically. The services of an aesthetically trained physician joined with the pampering, wellness-oriented environment of a spa can meet baby boomers’ demand for credible spa treatments, provide the convenience of one-stop shopping, and eliminate the cold, sterile, and depersonalized environment of the traditional medical office.

What is a medical spa? First, one should define the traditional spa. The International Spa Association defines the traditional spa as an entity devoted to enhancing overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body, and spirit. The medical spa is a facility that operates under the supervision of a licensed health care professional whose primary purpose is to provide comprehensive medical and wellness care in an environment that integrates spa services with traditional and complementary and/or alternative therapies and treatments. The facility operates within the scope of practice of its staff, which can include both aesthetic/cosmetic and prevention/wellness procedures and services.

To comprehend better the full scope of a medical spa, it is instructive to take a look inside the first medical spa, the Juva MediSpa. Its founder (BK) actually coined and trademarked the term “medi-spa.” Juva MediSpa was a traditional cosmetic dermatology practice on the Upper East Side in Manhattan, New York, that employed one aesthetician. In this practice the author (BK) recognized three trends. (1) There was increased patient demand for integrated services. (2) Traditional spa treatments did not offer lasting skin benefits. (3) He was treating an increasing number of patients suffering adverse reactions caused by poorly trained personnel at various spa locations. As a result, in 1999, the center moved to a larger, 5000-square-foot facility in midtown Manhattan, and the first physician-formulated medical spa treatments were born.

At the new facility a warm and inviting environment welcomes the patient as he or she enters from the elevator (Fig. 1). At the front desk, the

![Fig. 1. Reception desk at Juva MediSpa.](image-url)
patient is provided with an informational brochure that details the services offered by the center and intake forms that the patient completes in the spacious reception area. Unlike a traditional spa, the patient completes a detailed demographic and medical history form. Unlike a traditional spa, physicians are on site to assist the aesthetician with patient care, to answer patient questions, or to provide consultations.

Unlike a traditional medical office, the waiting area of the Juva MediSpa is luxurious and inviting with comfortable, cushioned chairs and additional brochures that provide information ranging from the prevention of skin cancer to the latest laser technology (Fig. 2). Two television monitors provide a visual tour of the center and media segments of procedures and technologies pioneered at the Juva MediSpa. The treatment areas of the center are divided into two separate but connected sections: one for the medispa treatments and the other for medical and surgical procedures. This arrangement allows the pampering and wellness-oriented environment of the spa to segue gently to the safe, efficient, professional, and confidential patient treatment area.

The popularity of the medical spa is rising as baby boomers who have discretionary income aggressively seek to maintain youthful looks and search for preventive health care services in environments that are more pleasant than the de-personalized medical clinic with its emphasis on disease. Medical spas also appeal to the growing number of Americans who want to combine conventional and alternative medicine in their quest for optimal health with a holistic approach.

One example shows the benefits of this approach. A patient presents for evaluation and treatment of a large port-wine stain. She receives a consultation regarding treatment options by a staff physician. She is informed of the risks, benefits, and side effects of the treatments as well as other alternatives. She undergoes the laser treatment after signing a consent form and experiences expected postoperative purpura. In contrast to the traditional medical office, she then is directed to the adjacent paramedical make-up counter located in the spa and is advised as to which cover-up make-up would match her skin tone best while camouflaging her treatment area. This one-stop shopping makes sense and is what the consumer demands today.

**HOW THE MEDICAL SPA DIFFERS FROM THE TRADITIONAL SPA**

Medical spas differ from traditional spas in several ways. At the medical spa, consumers enjoy treatments that have genuine medical value as well as long-lasting aesthetic benefits. For example, depending on state law, aestheticians trained by and under the supervision of the dermatologist may use medical devices for laser hair removal and nonablative laser rejuvenation. The aestheticians and physicians can consult each other regarding patient care, and spa treatments are incorporated into medical and surgical procedures to enhance outcomes. This collaboration contrasts with the traditional spa where modalities may be used by poorly trained technicians without adequate supervision. Adverse events in such settings have led to new legislation in certain states restricting laser treatments to physicians or licensed practitioners.

Because of the extensive training that dermatologists, plastic surgeons, and many other physicians complete, treatments at medical spas such as acid peels, lasers, botulinum toxin, and injectable fillers can be performed safely. Sterile technique always is employed when appropriate (Figs. 3 and 4), and consent forms and other

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**Fig. 2.** Reception area at Juva MediSpa.

**Fig. 3.** Sterilized surgical instruments.
appropriate documentation are kept securely on file. Patient information is confidential, and only direct caretakers are permitted access. Clients feel more confident in the efficacy of medically supervised treatments and are more likely to undergo more aggressive treatments such as chemical peels and microdermabrasion with an aesthetician when a physician is on site. It is important to maintain the consistency of procedures for all treatments; that is, ancillary staff should adhere to the same treatment protocols for each patient to ensure a uniform, reliable client experience. This concept is discussed further in the section on management.

Patient and client documentation is another important facet of the medical spa that contrasts with practice in the traditional spa. Appropriate documentation is required in both the spa and medical segments of the medical spa. As mentioned earlier, intake forms are mandatory. These forms include demographic information, medical history, and pertinent symptoms. Consent forms are reviewed with each patient, and no procedures are conducted without a signed consent in the chart. Ample time is provided to answer any questions patients may have.

In addition to intake and consent forms, flow sheets are created and maintained for each patient and for each treatment modality. In this way, previous treatment parameters (eg, settings for laser treatments or times for chemical peel) are documented and can be referred to for future treatments. These forms also may include the lot number for injectable fillers and chemical peels, which may assist in identifying the potential cause for adverse reactions. Finally, the flow sheets can be used to document which provider used the modality last to identify whether laser malfunction or adverse outcome can be attributed to human error. This documentation is an essential feature of the well-run medical spa that also helps educate the staff members. These forms legitimize the medical spa and help to differentiate it from the traditional spa, which may not use such strict documentation practices (Fig. 5).

The creation of a pampering experience and attention to service is integral to the medical spa experience. The adage “the customer is always right” should remain in the forefront of the minds of staff members. Attention to detail is paramount, and employees should be encouraged to take pride in their services. This attitude, although natural in the spa environment, unfortunately is at odds with that of many of today’s health care professionals who are overworked, underpaid, and often underappreciated by patients. On other hand, patients may view these same health care professionals as harried, sharp, and lacking in compassion. The medical spa environment can eliminate this dichotomy.

The medical spa and traditional spa share a serene environment. The environment of the medical spa entails both the physical setting and the patient/client experience. Medical offices can learn from the operation characteristically used by traditional spas. Warmth is emphasized with low-level lighting for common areas, soft music on overhead speakers, and beautiful artwork. Subdued wall colors rather than the sterile beige-white should be considered. A professional consulting firm or spa architect should be considered when developing a medical spa.

At the medical spa, clients can obtain comprehensive skincare in a single facility that establishes the connection between beauty and science. The credibility of the spa is enhanced, and the therapeutic benefits of medically formulated agents are passed on to the clients. This advanced program of aesthetic medicine can improve communication and relations with aestheticians and alternative medicine providers in the community.

IMPLEMENTING THE MEDICAL SPA CONCEPT

Before implementing the medical spa concept, it is important to understand the current trends in the industry. Understanding these trends will help the practitioner tailor services appropriately, thereby meeting the needs of the targeted
During the 9-year period between 1997 and 2006, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery polled 14,000 practitioners to ascertain which of the following procedures were performed most commonly: collagen injections, hyaluronic fillers, chemical peels, microdermabrasion, laser hair removal, and botulinum toxin cosmetic procedures. Of these six most common nonsurgical cosmetic procedures, cosmetic procedures involving botulinum toxin represented more than 40% of the market share. In other words, cosmetic procedures involving...
botulinum toxin tallied more than laser hair removal and hyaluronic acid fillers combined. Therefore, the clinician would be well advised to provide botulinum toxin cosmetic procedures as a service to his patients and to train staff to answer patient inquiries about these procedures and to market them readily in the practice.

It also is important to conduct a continued review of the trends in the marketplace. The previous discussion about botulinum toxin demonstrates this point. Although the use of botulinum toxin increased in the period between 1997 and 2006, the rate of botulinum toxin use actually decreased by 3% toward the end of the survey, whereas the
use of hyaluronic acid filler increased by 33%. A practitioner who did not stay current with the market trends might have missed an opportunity to serve patients appropriately, and this oversight might have resulted in decreased profit margins.

One of the risks in implementing the medical spa concept in a traditional medical practice is that staff members from varying backgrounds may not view treatments the same way. For example, a patient presents to the spa for a facial. At the end of the facial the patient asks the staff member about the botulinum toxin brochure displayed in the waiting area. Inadvertently, the staff member says, “Oh I would never want to have a poison injected into my face!” Similarly, after a surgical procedure to remove a skin cancer, a patient inquires about the benefits of a chemical peel for her face. The nurse removing the sutures responds, “Oh honey, you can get the same effect of a peel with many over-the-counter washes.” One can understand how these scenarios would pose a problem in a medical spa practice.

Employees should be encouraged to observe clinicians perform a variety of procedures, to attend educational seminars, and to read appropriate current literature. Clinicians should be encouraged to experience massages, to observe facials, and to listen in during make-up consultations.

Clearly, as the practice transitions to the medical spa, it is important to educate the staff about the qualities of the new services available. One should develop a standard operating procedural manual and make sure everyone reads it. A training program for the staff should stress the consistency of services. One should create a procedure manual and administer written and hands-on testing to ensure a high quality of service. Although more staff may be better, it also is important to weed out underperforming members. The dermatologist should test the services of the staff members personally and should employ secret shoppers to suggest improvements.

Secret shoppers or mystery shoppers are individuals such as friends or family members that the dermatologist selects to visit the practice. While visiting the medical spa, the secret shopper evaluates every aspect of the staff and services from the moment the shopper makes the appointment until he or she departs after the service. The shopper comments on factors such as the staff’s professionalism and knowledge about products. The information collected by the secret shopper then can be used to address any deficits or educational holes that need improving. Patient questionnaires also can be used to assess client satisfaction with services rendered in the medical spa. Using regular patient questionnaires and secret shopper reports can help maintain the quality of services. Policies should be in place to keep services consistent so that, when patients or clients have questions, the responses can be uniform and well informed. The importance of investing in staff training and development cannot be overemphasized.

Although training and testing staff members is crucial, it is also extremely important to show them appreciation. A holiday party or an occasional lunch or dinner is a simple way to reward the support team for work well done. One should measure patient and employee satisfaction levels and also strive to increase one’s own productivity.

The learning curve of transitioning to a medical spa may be steep and somewhat laborious for both the dermatologist and the staff, but the end result of proper education is a happier and more team-oriented group. When making the move from a medical office to a medical spa, everyone should convey a positive attitude about the transition, especially when informing patients of the availability of new treatments. One way to encourage this attitude is to place mirrors at all reception stations. This way, the receptionist may observe his or her reflection and be reminded to use supportive body language and to smile. These adjustments in body language and expression can be perceived over the telephone as well as in the office.

**MARKETING THE PRACTICE**

Marketing is an important way to inform patients and the public about the new services a medical spa provides. One should plan to allocate about 2% to 5% of revenues as a marketing budget to promote the medical spa. A reputable public relations firm can identify the appropriate media to reach the targeted demographic group based on age, socioeconomic description, geographic location, and other factors.

Branding is the first step in marketing a business. Branding is a concept that may be foreign to many physicians, but branding has been shown to improve recognition of services and products. For example, in 1999, Aflac was a zero-profile company selling supplemental health insurance in the workplace. A television advertisement in 2000 showed two people sitting on a park bench trying to remember the insurer’s name. A duck reminds them over and over again by quacking the name “Aflac” in the voice of comedian Gilbert Gottfried. After the introduction of the advertisement, the company enjoyed 90% brand awareness, a rate unheard of in its market. Just as branding was
used in the television commercial, branding can help the new medical spa create visibility and recognition. Most importantly, it conveys the positive experience a patient or client can expect at the spa. Branding of a medical spa starts with the creation of a logo, which should be simple but memorable. The logo helps personalize the product line as well as all aspects of the spa. The logo should be put on everything and everywhere: printed material, robes, cups, pens, and other items used in the facility (Fig. 6).

Other important marketing concepts include comprehensive brochures, monthly lectures, a quarterly newsletter, discounts for bringing or referring a friend, and gift certificates. A customized brochure should describe the services available, office policies, and physician profiles (Fig. 7). The design should be updatable easily to include the latest procedures.

Monthly lectures are a great way to bring new patients into the center. At Juva Skin & Laser Center, the waiting area is equipped with a projection screen that drops from the ceiling for presentations and visual aids. The lecture series serve several functions. (1) They get people in the door and introduce them to the clinic and spa. (2) They inform and educate the public about the services offered. (3) They allow the creation of a database containing the contact information of prospective clients.

Perhaps the most powerful referral source for a center is the happy, satisfied patient. Happy patients also are the least expensive way to promote services. A recent article suggests ways to use one’s current client base. An excerpt from this article begins: “Mrs. Jones, thank you for your kind words. You know I’d like to have more people just like you. Would you tell some of your friends about us?” The article continues by advising one to reward Mrs. Jones for the referral by sending a note of gratitude with a gift card toward something she has been buying or a procedure she wants to have done (Fig. 8). Capitalizing on these encounters or “bring-a-friend” discounts are easy ways to cultivate the existing client base.

A quarterly newsletter is a very cost-effective form of advertising, and suppliers’ advertisements can reduce the cost of printing and postage (Fig. 9). These newsletters can be sent or emailed to current clients or to prospective clients who came to a monthly lecture. One exposure usually is not enough. Most people forget what they read, and they also may be slow to move. People may need up to five or six contacts before they decide to come in for a procedure. Other marketing strategies include a complimentary product at the initial visit.

**MANAGING THE MEDICAL SPA**

Revenues from a medical spa can realize a profit margin of 20% to 30%, which can be twice that of a traditional spa. This kind of profit margin can be achieved only with good management, however. Good management is the key to success. One should hold regular meetings with the staff and keep minutes of the proceedings. It is extremely important to review the minutes from the previous meeting to make sure that new policies and procedures have been implemented. One should be explicit in delegating tasks and should be sure to state the obvious. What may seem obvious to the director may need to be explained to members of the staff.

Regular business reports should be assembled to show important financial parameters of the medical spa. These reports include revenues from procedures (broken down by providers), revenues from products, overhead expenses, payroll costs, and staff productivity. Product sales should provide approximately 30% to 40% of revenues, with the balance coming from services.

Benchmarking is another important practice that should become a routine part of the business. What is benchmarking? Benchmarking is process used to ascertain the best practices that will lead to superior performance. By benchmarking one can measure the performance of the methods, procedures, products, and services of a practice against those of other practices that consistently distinguish themselves in the same measurement areas. Statistical comparisons include charges, revenues, expenses, and gross/net collection percentages. For example, most practices spend a certain percentage of their revenue on staff. If a practice is spending 30% of revenue on staff...
salaries and benefits, and the industry standard spends 15% (half the amount), the leader of the medical spa should strive to achieve this target and make adjustments where necessary to ensure the greatest profitability. One should benchmark the finances of the practice frequently and make practice planning a routine.

One should watch the business trends carefully and investigate numbers that do not make sense. For example, several years ago at Juva Skin & Laser Center, the number of patient/client visits was increasing, but income was dropping. What could have been the reason for this? After several weeks’ investigation, it was realized that the staff member responsible for appointment scheduling was scheduling extra time for new patients and procedures, padding the schedule so that the staff member could leave the office earlier. This staff member was terminated. A meeting with the rest of the staff alerted them that such practices were considered as sabotaging the medical spa and would not be tolerated. To achieve optimal performance, it is important to have good information to make good business decisions. One must.

![Customized brochure](image1.png)

**Fig. 7.** Customized brochure. *(Courtesy of Juva Skin & Laser Center, New York, NY; with permission.)*

![Juva MediSpa gift certificate](image2.png)

**Fig. 8.** Juva MediSpa gift certificate.
surround oneself with people one can trust, but one also should verify changes personally.

Although the example given previously could be explained as an innocent mistake in which the staff member did not realize how her actions might affect the bottom line, other more disheartening examples of staff theft, dishonesty, and even assault have been reported. To enhance the safety and security of the medical spa (for the director, for staff, and for patients), many offices use security cameras. These cameras, installed in public areas and not in patient rooms, are a valuable tool for surveillance and deterrence.
investment. They can be installed so that the areas can be viewed online even when one is not physically in the office. Employees are notified of the camera’s presence, and this knowledge helps diminish dramatically the impulse to take products from the office. The film also serves as a possible record of any criminal offenses.

As noted earlier, it is important to attract good staff and to train them properly. How does one do this? Before hiring a staff member, it is crucial to have an established training program. One must create a training manual that details job descriptions. The practice manual should stress consistency of services and responses to various clinical and nonclinical scenarios. One should invest the resources in retraining current staff and encourage the pursuit of continuing medical education credits. One should establish patient questionnaires to evaluate staff performance. Once these building blocks are in place, one should use various recruitment methods, including word of mouth and advertisements in newspapers, medical journals, and perhaps on radio and television.

When an applicant is invited to visit the practice, one should make sure to include staff members (eg, the office manager, the head nurse, the patient care coordinator, front desk manager, and even competing assistants) in the interviewing process. Doing so helps ascertain the “best fit” for the practice. Also, during the interview, the interviewee should be asked to perform tasks relevant to the job description. Even though applicants may declare they have proficiency in various programs, they sometimes exaggerate their skills. One should ask the applicant to demonstrate his or her knowledge during the interview by working with the practice’s programs. Another method of assessing a suitable applicant is role-playing. One can provide various scenarios and evaluate the applicant’s responses. Factors predictive of good development include energy, potential, motivation, loyalty, and intelligence.

This discussion underscores several important points. It is important (1) to investigate when business numbers do not make sense, (2) to hire the right staff and invest in staff training, and (3) to weed out the underperforming staff. Also, and perhaps most importantly, one must recognize and embrace the role of the leader in the practice.

**DISPENSING SKINCARE PRODUCTS**

There are several advantages to dispensing cosmeceuticals from the medical spa. Kligman coined the term “cosmeutical” to indicate a topical preparation that is sold as a cosmetic but has performance characteristics that suggest a pharmaceutical action. This group of agents is difficult to categorize because of the well-established practice of media hype and because the publication of the preparations’ true pharmacologic actions would require reclassification of these agents as drugs. These factors make it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Despite these difficulties, in the first half of 2002 the sales of cosmeceuticals increased by 83% while overall sales for skincare products increased by only 1%.10

Rokhsar summarized the agents that show the most promise. These include vitamin C, alpha-hydroxy acids, retinoids, and growth factors. Vitamin C improves skin texture and pigmentation by acting as an antioxidant. Vitamin C is a known cofactor in collagen synthesis and has been shown to stimulate new collagen production. Alpha-hydroxy acids improve dyspigmentation and fine rhytids by accelerating exfoliation, resulting in increased epidermal turnover. Growth factors regulate fibroblasts and other mechanisms involved with wound healing. The end result is improved pigment, texture, and rhytids.10

Retinoids have been shown to be the most efficacious of these products. Retinol is the main dietary source, transport, and storage form of vitamin A and is found in many over-the-counter products. It is marketed as an anti-aging agent. In the body, retinol is converted to the biologically active form, all-trans retinoic acid (tretinoin).

Several studies have confirmed the efficacy of tretinoin in improving fine lines, mottled pigmentation, roughness, and laxity. Although retinol is 20-fold less effective than tretinoin, and the cutaneous concentration of tretinoin is 1000-fold less in topically applied retinol than in topically applied tretinoin, recent studies have shown efficacy.11 One study of 24 patients using 0.15%, 0.3%, and 0.6% concentrations over a period of 6 months showed histologic and clinical epidermal improvement in all patients using the two higher concentrations and in 40% of those using 0.15% retinol.12 Incorporating the use of products that have higher concentrations of retinol into the practice is something to consider. The use of some form of retinoid should be a mainstay in treatment in most patients’ skin care regimen.

In making other products available to patients, one should consider the following parameters:

1. Choose noncomedogenic formulations, especially for products that will be used on the face and neck
2. Make sure products are fragrance free to avoid possible allergic contact reactions.
3. For patients who have sensitive skin, the products should be hypoallergenic.
4. The ideal product should be pleasing to the patient when applied. In other words it should not feel greasy or leave a residue or film. The product should be “cosmetically elegant.”

One rationale for and advantage of dispensing products in the medical spa is obtaining knowledge about and control over the products patients are using on their skin. In the authors’ experience, patients present to the clinic after using numerous over-the-counter or Internet-purchased products; usually these patients are using too many products (often incorrectly) that have no proven efficacy after spending tens, hundreds, and sometimes thousands of dollars. By dispensing products from a line that one has chosen personally, one can provide the patient with efficacious, reliable products that are customized to meet the patient’s specific needs. Patients who obtain products from the medical spa will avoid confusion from the use of other products and will obtain more comprehensive care. Convenient one-stop shopping, minimizing irritant or contact dermatitis, and reducing issues of noncompliance are added advantages. Finally, repeat sales at the office and Web site improve profit margins.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to brand the products. When branding the office pens, paperwork and brochures, one should consider branding some or all of the topical agents. Branding these products adds to the medical spa’s exclusivity and visibility. Existing private-label lines can be used, or product formulations can be developed with a cosmetic chemist. To keep the product line simple, one can organize it by skin type (eg, aging skin, sensitive skin, and oily skin). Products also can be organized by ingredients. With this method, one can provide comprehensive categories such as cleansers, sunscreens, moisturizers, eye creams, and body lotions. Key ingredients may include glycolic acid, antioxidants, botanicals, and alpha-lipoic acid. The products should be exclusive and difficult to find elsewhere.

The packaging of the products is important. Packaging provides 60% to 70% of product appeal and should be nicely styled but not flashy. The products should be presented in one location, in a highly visible area. The shelves should be open, and testers should be available so customers can try the products. A staff person should be nearby to monitor and answer questions. All staff, including physicians, aestheticians, nurses, and front-desk staff, should be educated about each product. Financial incentives may be given to all staff for selling products. One should test the staff’s knowledge about the products and undertake a periodic analysis of sales by staff.

Some physicians may feel uncomfortable about selling products from their practice. Several articles detail the various opinions, pro and con, surrounding the ethical issues of physician-office dispensing. Those who oppose physician dispensing claim the selling of nonprescription products in the office is driven solely by the profit motive and creates an inherent conflict of interest. Proponents of physician dispensing discuss the convenience for the patient, improved compliance, and physician expertise. Although the decision to dispense is a personal one, Gormley suggests eight facets of ethical dispensing:

1. The product must confer a true benefit.
2. Risks, benefits, advantages, and disadvantages should be discussed.
3. The product must be sold at a fair price.
4. There must be no misrepresentation of the product.
5. No pressure tactics should be used.
6. Patients must not be encouraged to discard existing stocks of similar products.
7. Products should be sold with a replacement guarantee.
8. In the unlikely event of an adverse effect, management for the problem must be provided free of charge.

One also should analyze the economics for the patient and the profit for the medical spa while avoiding pressuring the patient to buy the medical spa’s product rather than other retail products. To achieve this goal, the products should be priced below comparable retail products. This pricing should ameliorate the ethical dilemma of dispensing skincare products. In addition, one can improve customer service and patient satisfaction by providing full refunds if a client is not completely happy with the product.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERVICES

In addition to cosmeceuticals, several other services should be considered for inclusion in the medical spa. Health and wellness services are a natural extension. Associating with other health care professionals such as nutritionists, physical therapists, acupuncturists, psychotherapists, and others can provide an edge over the competition. Canyon Ranch has used this multitiered approach successfully. For example, working with a registered dietician who can advise clients about the relationships among food and health, fitness, and weight loss may help a liposuction patient fine-tune her posttreatment goals. Employing body
therapists who offer massage, herbal wraps, and water treatments will underscore the importance of the pampering environment.

The presence of a holistic physician with an orientation toward disease prevention and maintenance of a healthy lifestyle will add to the medical spa’s cachet. This provider can be an internist or a general or family practitioner. One should select colleagues who are excellent communicators and who value prevention and a healthy lifestyle. Patients can be referred to an acupuncturist for pain management or to a chiropractor for musculoskeletal issues. Patients seeking anti-aging treatments can meet with a psychotherapist for stress reduction or smoking cessation. Those interested in liposuction or cellulite treatment can consult a personal trainer for an exercise regimen. A consulting relationship with a cardiologist for stress testing and other noninvasive studies can complement the medical and spa services.

INNOVATION AND CUTTING EDGE

The medical spa concept is new and exciting. Patients, clients, and physicians have recognized the desire for effective and convenient aesthetic-based services, and the emergence of the medical spa meets this desire. Providing the appropriate spa services and creating a pampering care environment adds value for a dermatology practice. When incorporating medical spa services into the practice, the dermatologist should remember that he or she is the leader, and the entire team must support the transition. One must demand consistency of services from the staff and promote continuing education and training. Assertive marketing, branding, and managing of the medical spa are crucial components of long-term success. Diligent management with rapid response to changes in the marketplace and continued innovation will ensure the success of the medical spa.

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