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To Spa or Not To Spa?

By Debbie Vallejo

NEED TIME AWAY to momentarily forget life's worries? Need a way to lower blood pressure and work out sore muscles? Wouldn't it be nice not to spend time in front of the mirror every morning trying to figure out easy, painless ways to deal with the results of too much sun and the inevitable results of aging? There are people that say they can help and they describe what they can offer as nothing short of miraculous. They will massage out the worries of the day, lift the wrinkles of time right off any face, offer glorious ways to relax, remove hair completely off the body and inject new life under the skin. Who are "they?" They are self-acknowledged miracle workers. They are "The Spas."

The International Spa Association (ISPA) defines a 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 word actually originated from the Latin phrase, "salus per aquae," meaning "health through water" in reference to the healing power of natural hot springs or baths. According to ISPA there are almost 14,000 spas in the United States, up from a little over 10,000 spas in April 2004. The spa business is growing at a rate of 16 percent annually, a testament to the impact the industry is having on the paying public.

Spas are popping up everywhere: on cruise ships, hotels and resorts, fitness clubs and even in airports where the stranded traveler may desire a nice massage to relieve the stress resulting from flight cancellations. In fact, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have found the benefits of massage to include a decrease in depression, alleviating pain from migraines, improving alertness and decreasing hypertension or high blood pressure. It may benefit airlines to

provide a little free massage before each flight, or at least for every customer experiencing a delay or cancellation. Think of all the happy, alert and calm customers! Even a pedicure has the ability to benefit overall health. According to Foot Care Direct, the average pair of feet endures a cumulative force of several hundred tons a day. A pedicure cleans the feet and takes care of toe nails, not bad for an average of \$15 a session.

The spas springing up in Frisco fall mainly under one of two categories: the Day Spa and the Medical Spa. The Day Spa offers typical spa services such as massages; facials; and body treatments, like scrubs and wraps, steam rooms, saunas and other relaxing options. The Medical Spa often offers many of the same traditional services as a Day Spa, but also provides medical treatments, like removing unwanted hair and scars, diminishing sun damage and wrinkles, as

well as removing crow's feet near the eyes and decreasing thick bands in the neck.

The list of possible treatments in a medical spa is extensive. The most common are microdermabrasion, laser hair removal and Botox injections. Microdermabrasion uses pressure to move tiny microscopic crystals over the skin's surface, restoring the skin to a more youthful look. Laser hair removal utilizes actual lasers to damage the hair root, hopefully preventing the hair from growing back. Botox, or Botulinum Toxin Type A, is actually a poison that, when injected, can smooth lines and wrinkles by preventing contraction of the muscles lying under the skin.

Gayle Mitchell is a client of a spa in Frisco and says she would recommend any of the three procedures if under the close supervision of a doctor. She loves the results of her microdermabrasion and laser skin treatments. "It's obviously working, I love the results and the fact that it's not surgical," says Ms. Mitchell. "My skin looks marvelous!" All three of these treatments are considered medical



Dr. Erin Welch

photo by Chris Fritchie

procedures, thus a practicing Medical Spa is run under the supervision of a licensed healthcare professional. The point of contention among professionals in the industry is how much supervision is ethically required in order to provide consumers with a safe standard of care.

THE DOCTOR'S ROLE

How spas are regulated actually varies

from state to state. Dr. Erin Welch is assistant professor of dermatology at UT Southwestern Medical School in Dallas. "Texas is one of the least regulated states in the industry," explains Dr. Welch. "There is regulation pending, but unfortunately nothing has come to pass as of yet." According to Dr. Welch, just about anyone can call themselves a med spa, it is up to the consumer to ask the pointed questions to better understand how the medical supervisor is involved and the qualifications of the professional providing the care. "Treat medical procedures in a spa like you would any other medical procedure and do your research," advises Dr. Welch.

Dr. Sheila Calderon, owner of Elite MedSpa in Frisco, provides 100 percent of the medical treatments completed in the facility and believes in full physician involvement in each case. "I conduct all of my medical procedures," says Dr. Calderon. "We can get the results everyone is looking for because we are very conscious of why we are doing what we are doing. We are results driven."

There are many doctors who feel they



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provide adequate medical supervision by properly training their staff and overseeing the facility, without having to be at each medical procedure. Dr. Rod Rohrick is professor and chairman of the department of plastic surgery at UT Southwestern. He supervises the Klinger boutique in North Park. "In our clinic we have an excellent nurse practitioner who conducts laser treatments and administers Botox injections," explains Dr. Rohrick. "We have spent months and months training her. It's all about providing for a patient's safety and maximizing the outcomes."

Dr. Rohrick does stress that a patient should feel comfortable and ask the right questions before utilizing a facility. "If a patient has any hesitation, they should ask their own physician about the procedure," says Dr. Rohrick. Klinger has raised some eyebrows in the medical community because of its location in a shopping mall and the use of a nurse practitioner as the primary administrator of medical procedures. Still, those raising questions in the medical community are themselves doctors with their own



practices, so it becomes increasingly important for patients to understand the industry and how to find a spa with medical personnel they can trust.

Another option for the consumer is the medical spa franchise. Sona MedSpa in Frisco is one of 29 locations nationwide and has been in business for ten years. The Frisco location has a medical director who oversees all the staff and treatments, reviews each chart

after every treatment, but does not conduct the procedures himself. Tony Fort is the owner of the Frisco facility. "Being part of a national franchise is great," explains Mr. Fort. "We have a full time National Medical Director who has a team that tests the claims of various laser manufacturers...and we have a patented process, 'The Sona Concept,' that gives us the best results for laser hair removal." Seventy percent of Frisco's Sona MedSpa's business is in laser hair removal treatments. "Clients do a lot of shopping around and most all of them say they decided to come to Sona because they felt we really understand what we are doing," says Mr. Fort.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

Unfortunately, with the rapid growth of the spa industry has come tragedy as a result of medical mistakes made in the course of administering some of these medical procedures. Texas regulations governing the business have not kept up with the growth and number of individuals administering medical treatments in spas.



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The FDA issued an advisory this past February warning the public of the potential hazards of using skin numbing products for cosmetic procedures. These topical anesthetics contain drugs such as lidocaine, tetracaine and benzocaine and come in the form of a gel, cream or ointment that is rubbed on the skin. These products are approved for use to relieve pain, itching and burning due to medical conditions and are usually applied under supervision of a medical professional when utilized before a medical procedure.

In issuing the advisory the FDA acknowledged the fact that, without adequate supervision, patients may apply high doses of the product(s) causing life-threatening side effects. The advisory mentions two cases in

other states where women, both in their twenties, applied the anesthetic creams to their legs prior to laser hair removal. The women wrapped their legs in plastic wrap to increase the effects of the cream, as per the instructions of the individual conducting the procedure. Both women had seizures, fell into comas and died because lethal amounts of the drugs had passed through their skin into the blood stream. What should be of special concern to the public is the fact that both procedures took place in association with Med Spas. One woman was in her car on her way to her laser hair removal treatment when her reaction occurred. She had applied the cream herself via the instructions provided by the spa intending to conduct the procedure.

Looking on the surface, it would be easy to panic about the possible ramifications of cases where disaster has struck consumers utilizing spa facilities. Even our feet aren't safe from the side effects of poor management and professionals not practicing due diligence in taking care of equipment. Small microscopic bacteria can seep through the skin



from water in dirty footbaths and cause irreparable damage to feet and legs. Still, the consumers of today are walking into spas in greater numbers, the desire for some R&R and youthful skin overriding the apparent dangers of laser burns and microscopic bacteria. Well, fear not, despite the potential for damage, like any other medical procedure, spas are actually relatively safe. The "relatively" is the qualifier because spa safety is just as much in the hands of the consumer as the professionals who run them. After all, a business doesn't function without customers.

CONSUMER RESPONSIBILITY

When first meandering through the spa world, the new spa consumer should carefully consider a number of factors. First, conduct a little investigation. Check out spas in the area and narrow down options. Make a list of spas with desired procedures and call them to set up appointments for a free analysis. If a spa doesn't offer a free consultation, cross them off the list. "When someone walks into our facility we take pictures, look

underneath the skin, discuss the results they are wanting and the procedures they are interested in," explains Dr. Calderon. "We create an individual plan for each client." Sona MedSpa and the Klinger boutique offer similar consultations.

Keep in mind each spa thinks it has the answers to all skin care and relaxation needs. They are a moneymaking business, so stay objective. Ask all the important questions. Who is conducting the procedure? What is their training? How involved is the medical supervisor? What are the possible

side effects of the treatment? What happens if something goes wrong? Make a comparison sheet and see everything in black and white. What does each spa have to offer? Where is your comfort level the highest?

Gayle Mitchell recommends doing the legwork to find out all the information about a spa before the first consultation, that way a consumer isn't swayed by the beautiful exterior and amenities. "Do your research," says Ms. Mitchell. "I'm not as much into the bells and whistles in a spa, I just want results I can trust."

How does a consumer know when something is not right with a procedure or treatment? Dr. Welch recommends any patient exercise extreme caution when a professional is unwilling to discuss their credentials and training. "Ask how complications are handled, where the doctor is and who the doctor is. Ask what type of board certification the doctor has and how they have been trained to conduct the procedure," explains Dr. Welch. "They should review your medical history and allergies with you first."



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Some of the procedures are slightly uncomfortable, but, according to Dr. Welch, not really painful when done properly. "If you are thinking the procedure is really painful, make them stop," says Dr. Welch. "If you have concerns about persistent pain, color changes in the skin, blistering or broken skin, swelling or if you are worried that you may have an infection after the procedure, see your doctor immediately. It's better to be safe than sorry."

Another potential red flag is the price. A medical spa procedure is one of the few times when a consumer should beware if the price is too low. "The materials are still very expensive, so there is a certain cost that any legitimate place has to cover," explains Dr. Welch. "If the price is too good to be true, then it probably is." Botox, for example, can be diluted so a consumer does not receive the full effect of the drug.

Newcomers to the spa world may also want to check out the ISPA website. It is full of resources and recommendations when deciding on a spa facility. There is even a Consumer Rights and Responsibilities page where new clients can read up on expectations for consumer behavior in a spa.

The benefits of the various therapies and procedures provided by spas are personal and unique to each person. When spas are run and supervised safely they are a great place to relax and enjoy some of the benefits of living in the twenty-first century. If a consumer does his or her homework, checks out the facility in advance and keeps a ear to the ground for a snow job, the only serious danger facing a spa devotee is in the form of a little less money in the bank. The treatments can be expensive, although consumers are obviously willing to shell out the cash. The spa business is nothing if not results driven and the number of people willing to spend hard earned money on continual procedures is in itself a testament to the success of treatments. This information is meant to arm those debating a quick, pre-summer trip to the spa with facts to help make a smart spa choice. "Happy Spa-ing!"

Debbie Vallejo is a freelance writer living in Frisco.