Cosmetic Dermatology Success Begins with Education

A specialist offers tips on where and how to acquire up-to-date information and training in the field of cosmetic dermatology.

By Susan H. Weinkle, MD

A irony lies at the heart of cosmetic dermatology today: The rapid evolution of the field presents both remarkably exciting opportunities and sets the stage for potential confusion among dermatologists. In order to provide the highest quality care possible and achieve the best possible results for each patient, dermatologists must actively seek the latest information while working to sharpen and update their skill.

The Balanced Approach
Providing cosmetic dermatology services is, to a large extent, about finding the right balance. Very few patients seek that tight, pulled, “overdone” look; most want a natural-looking, balanced rejuvenation. Few dermatologists devote their practice entirely to cosmetics; most build their practices around the mix of medical, surgical, and cosmetic services that they feel is right for them.

Finally, success in cosmetic dermatology requires that physicians offer the appropriate range of services and products to meet patients’ aesthetic goals and provide the natural look that they desire.

Most dermatologists now recognize that, for the majority of patients, optimal results often require proper administration of a combination of interventions. Botox is and has been a fundamental cosmetic intervention and has provided an entrée for both patients and dermatologists into the world of cosmetic dermatology procedures. It’s quick, it’s effective, and for the well-trained dermatologist it’s relatively straightforward. But to build a thriving cosmetics practice, dermatologists must offer a broad range of interventions, many of which will be provided in combination.

The “standard” approach many dermatologists cite is Botox for the top third of the face in combination with dermal fillers or volumizers for the bottom two thirds. Yet even this “recipe” is too simplistic.

Which filler is best for adding fullness to cheeks? Which is best to fill in deep alar folds? Which is going to offer the best results in lip augmentation? The answers to these questions will vary based on the patient and presentation. Plus, topical therapies, peels, or other interventions may also be indicated. Acquiring the appropriate blend of education and experience is critical to success for any dermatologist offering cosmetic services.

Learning the Basics
Keeping up with the literature is essential to a fundamental understanding of cosmetic products and services. Study reports as well as practical, expert opinions provide a valuable framework for understanding the efficacy and appropriate use of various interventions. Even experienced cosmetic dermatologists keep up with such papers and articles. These reports may introduce you to a new prod-
uct or a new application for an established agent. You may discover a simple modification to an existing technique that improves patient comfort, enhances results, or otherwise offers a benefit. You may also learn strategies for relevant practice management issues, like marketing, scheduling, pricing, etc.

Keeping Up With Patients
I feel it is important to also keep up with popular reporting of cosmetic dermatology. As providers, we ought to know what types of information our patients may be reading in newspapers and fashion, health, and lifestyle magazines (for women and men) as well as seeing and hearing on television and radio news shows. These sources generally provide fairly accurate though sometimes incomplete information. Of course, some outright inaccuracies are publicized.

It also helps to note what types of photos appear in reports. Sometimes reports feature beautiful models rather than clinical before and after photos. Patients cannot help but be influenced by these images, even if they objectively recognize that a procedure won’t make them look like the model.

I have found one magazine geared to the lay audience called New Beauty (for information, visit their website at www.newbeauty.com) that is generally quite accurate and provides comprehensive information about cosmetic services and cosmeceutical products. I now leave copies in my reception areas.

Live Demonstrations
It’s impossible to overstate the value of live patient demonstrations. Before and after photos offer a realistic sense of what cosmetic procedures can and cannot do for patients. Recorded demonstrations and instructional videos, DVDs, or CDs provide useful hints on technique and a nice overview of treatment. But both have limits. Photos are static, and recorded demonstrations are often edited takes of “clean” procedures.

To get a realistic sense of a procedure and what it’s like for the patient, physician, and staff, I firmly believe nothing is as useful as live, real-time viewing. In-office preceptorships (as discussed below) with an experienced physician are invaluable. However, live demonstrations are a great realistic introduction to procedures.

Although the setting does not exactly match a true clinical experience, live demonstrations offer a first-hand experience of the entire procedure from patient prep through to completion. You can get a sense of the time involved, staff requirements, and patient response. Plus, there are no edits, so you see how to handle the minor mishaps (materials aren’t prepared or aren’t handy, etc.) that inevitably happen in an actual clinical setting.

Finally, hearing a presenter share information immediately before and during the procedure makes for a much more meaningful, memorable experience. The AAD only recently began offering live-patient demonstrations, and I am so excited to be a part of these new offerings. I am participating in an “Interactive, Experiential Session” at next month’s Academy meeting (FRM 505, Thursday). For more information on this and other cosmetic programs, see the table on the previous page.

Preceptorships
Spending time working one-on-one with an experienced provider is an excellent way to follow-up the education you receive from reading the literature and attending educational lectures and workshops. They help you sharpen your skill and attain hands-on experience with actual patients.

Whether you complete an industry-sponsored workshop or visit a colleague across state, you will benefit immensely from a preceptorship. Never hesitate to contact manufacturers and marketers about educational opportunities they may offer. They can let you know about upcoming events and even help schedule you for one-on-one time with an experienced colleague.

Make the Most of It
It’s old advice, but it’s true: to derive the greatest benefit from an educational experience you must prepare in advance. Taking time out of your schedule to attend educational symposia often means tightly packed clinical days leading up to your departure. Plus there’s the travel (and social) planning. But if you’re taking the time to attend, then you might as well make the most of it. Even if you have to “cram” on the plane or train, make the time. As both a speaker and attendee, I recommend that you:

Read up on the topic before the workshop. Presenters at the AAD Annual Meetings and the Academy summer meetings often list recommended readings for attendees.

Come prepared with questions. Hopefully the presenter will answer your question within their lecture, but if they do not, you usually have time to pose questions.

Ask questions when the floor opens. Sometimes a moderator opens the floor to questions and not a single attendee comes to the mic with a question. If you have a question, chances are others may be wondering the same thing.

Stick around after the lecture. Don’t hesitate to approach the presenter after his or her lecture. Sometimes another engagement forces them to leave quickly, but usually they will appreciate your interest in the topic. Sometimes I make changes to future presentations based on questions I’ve received from attendees.