

THE MANY FACES OF MEDICAL SPAS

Spas are no longer seen as luxuries. For an aging and stressed population in the US, spas provide a way to stay young and healthy. Hence the growing trend of medical spas.

Many Medical Spas can offer a broad range of invasive and non-invasive cosmetic services mostly in a physician-supervised environment in conjunction with spa professionals. Breast augmentation, liposuction, Botox and collagen injections, face-lifts, microdermabrasion, cellulite reduction, hair transplants and laser hair removal are just some of the cosmetic and aesthetic procedures offered in medical spas today. Traditional facials and massages are usually also available. Dental Spas are also starting to gain popularity. Latest figures compiled by ISPA for its 2004 Spa Industry Study showed 471 medical spas in the US representing approx. 4% of US spa locations. According to the International Medical Spa Association [May 2005], the medical spa industry has doubled in size in the last four or five years and will double again in the next two years and should break the \$1 billion barrier by early 2006.

Medical spas now represent approximately ten percent of the overall spa industry if one combines pure medical spas, laser hair removal facilities, spas that are attached to doctors' offices and those now being built into resorts, says Mark Wuttke, head of the Wuttke Group. Mark's 20-year history in the spa industry, covering homeopathic medicine to Jurlique skin care, convinced him to form his Atlanta-based consultancy last winter to develop strategies that bring the medical spa into the mainstream of wellness and prevention of illness.

It used to be that people would go to a spa for a massage or facial. But these days, many spas have gone high-tech, offering the latest in laser treatments. Laser hair removal and skin rejuvenation is now a \$2 billion a year business in the U.S. That's big business but, for consumers, it could mean big problems. In her "ConsumerWatch" on CBS-TV, Susan Koeppen reported that some experts warn the number of patients being injured by laser treatments at spas is growing. They say that's because some of the people doing the procedures have very little training.

Koeppen used a hidden camera to go undercover, seeking to shed light on the problems. She also spoke with Jordan Miles of Panama City, Fla., who told her she loved the sun, but not the spots it left on her skin - so she went to a local spa for laser treatment. "I was going to have no freckles, no sun spots, my skin was gonna look renewed," Miles said. The spa told her the procedure was risk-free and, "There would be no side effects. I would be back to work the next day."

But instead of spotless skin, she got second- and third-degree burns all over her back and arms and was in what she describes as excruciating pain. "I had no idea that I would be permanently disfigured, that I would have zebra-striped skin," Miles said.

Turns out, Koeppen reported, the spa employee who treated Miles had minimal training in using a laser. That's a scenario becoming all too common, points out New York dermatologist Dr. Heidi Waldorf, of the American Society For Dermatological Surgery. Every month, says Waldorf, she treats patients who've been injured at laser spas. "These patients are often embarrassed that they went somewhere for a quick fix," she says. "They thought they could they could just walk in, it would be inexpensive, it would be fast, and unfortunately, you get what you pay for." Waldorf says spas should tell you upfront that this is a serious procedure, with potential side effects such as scarring, burning, and discoloration. But do they

With a hidden camera, Koeppen and her producer went to five New York spas to inquire about their laser treatments. Some, she says, were upfront about the risk.

A technician at one is seen on tape saying, "Any light, meaning like the light from the laser, can cause an immediate burn; there's like a 50-50 risk there."

Another admits, "I hate to say it, but you can get burned."

But at other spas, Koeppen and the producer were given a very different pitch.

One technician is caught by the hidden camera responding, "No, no, no, no, no!" when asked if Koeppen could get burned. "So, it's completely safe?" the producer asks. "No risk?"

"None" is the response.

"No side effects to the laser?" the producer pressed, at another spa.

"No, no, no, not at all," was the answer he got.

Koeppen asked if there's a chance she could get burned.

"No, I promise, and will give you a guarantee you're not gonna be burned, you're not gonna feel anything," a technician answers.

"This woman just frightens me," Waldorf said when shown that video. "Anybody who tells you that any treatment is 100 percent guaranteed, zero percent complication rate is lying to you, and you should run the other way."

A big no-no before and after laser treatment, Waldorf stresses, is tanning: It can cause permanent discoloration of the skin. But one spa employee assured Koeppen, "You can still tan honey, I'm telling you!"

"That last woman," Waldorf said, "I can only call her irresponsible. If you are tan, there is a higher risk of complications." Koeppen also shared the videos with Eric Light, president of the International Medical Spa Association, the group that represents laser spas.

Light told Koeppen he wasn't surprised some of the information she and the producer got wasn't right. He says the problem is, there are no national standards for laser spas and, too often, consumers are fooled by a nice décor and lots of certificates on the wall. The truth is that they don't mean a thing.

"Don't just naturally assume this person is extremely well trained," Light says. "That certificate on the wall means they attended a class," that could have been two hours long or even less.

His organization is pushing for better training and tougher regulations for spas, "a national standard," Light says, so everyone's on the same page.

What's it like at the moment, Koeppen inquired.

"Chaos," Light lamented.

Though the spa that inured Miles has gone out of business, Koeppen says, Miles still lives with the scars every day. She's too embarrassed to wear bathing suits, tank tops or even sun dresses.

"I feel like I would look like a freak at a sideshow," she says. "This has been a totally life-altering, life-changing experience for me."

Doctors have told Miles the stripes on her skin are permanent.

Koeppen and her producer called the spas where they went undercover for reaction to what they later learned. The owner of the spa that guaranteed they wouldn't burn said the spa has a good record, so it was fair to say they wouldn't burn. And the owner of the spa that told us there was no risk said its customers have never had any complications. Both spas said they have doctors who check people carefully before every treatment.

Koeppen tells The Early Show co-anchor Hannah Storm that anyone considering getting laser treatments done at spas needs "to ask a lot of questions. First, ask if there's a doctor on the premises. If there is, ask if you can see him or her. Also ask who will actually be doing your treatment. It might not be the doctor. What kind of training has this person had? And are there referrals? Ask to speak to others who've had it done.

"As a rule of thumb, should you try to see a dermatologist for any kind of laser work?" Storm asked.

"Doctors say, go see a doctor if you're going to get this done," Koeppen noted. "It's a serious medical procedure, and you should treat it as such."

Is price an indicator of the likely quality of the treatment you'd get?

"You do get what you pay for," Koeppen responded, "but don't be fooled if a spa is charging you a lot of money. Eric Light said it might be that the spa has a lot of rent to pay, so they're going to charge you a lot, so price doesn't matter."