

# Cosmetic Dermatology at a Crossroads

The 2007 annual meeting of the American Academy of Dermatology was distinctive for 2 reasons: it was one of the coldest I remember, and it may have been the one where I first felt cosmetic dermatology was at a crossroads. In order for the cosmetic dermatology industry to continue to grow in a healthy direction, it is imperative that cosmetic dermatologists all work for its ethical and responsible maturation while protecting it from unqualified outside intruders. This will depend on the cooperation among training programs, dermatologists and other core specialists, cosmetics companies, and the public.

We recently witnessed the addition of cosmetics salespeople to a prominent dermatology residency program. Although I appreciate the fact that this company wants to provide financial support to dermatology residencies, the addition of salespeople could be a potential detraction from the training of residents. This seems like an opportunity for pharmaceutical companies to gain something they had always been denied—a chance to come between the patients and the dermatologists. Hopefully, this collaboration will be implemented in a responsible manner with constant oversight of these salespeople, who have little or no training in dealing with patients.

Dermatologists are more qualified to dispense information about skin care products than the salesperson at the local department store cosmetics counter. One of the reasons I started selling skin care products in my office was because of the claims my patients made about the latest, greatest product to cure wrinkles in 30 minutes or less. These claims not only insulted the intelligence, but bordered on ridiculous, which is why I felt that an ethical approach to selling beauty products was necessary. Now, the same people who have misled a generation of shoppers will have another claim to make—that they work in the dermatology department at one of the leading medical schools in the United States. Sadly, this claim will be true.

Dermatologists continue to expand their cosmetic offerings each day, but oftentimes, they forget that the reason people trust us as dermatologists is that we have gone to

school for 3 extra years to learn our profession. Injections of botulinum toxin type A and fillers are now available at malls through programs such as the one offered by the medical center of a major university in conjunction with a national medspa chain. This program is reported to have been reviewed by experts at a prestigious university and is endorsed by a former president of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. However, programs such as these only serve to denigrate our profession and make it seem as if anyone can perform injections with botulinum toxin type A and fillers or any other procedure. If this is true, then why do we spend so much time to become board certified? I asked the head of a pharmaceutical company why a cosmetic product would be sold to such a venture, where the head doctor rarely steps foot in the “boutique.” The response I received was that it is done because there are no rules that say it should not be done. Perhaps it is time to develop some rules.

One potential bright spot is the fact that pharmaceutical companies are now entering the cosmeceutical space with research on new products. In the past, the formula for success that cosmetics companies followed was to find a physician willing to endorse a product (whether good or bad) and have that physician aggressively sell it until the next new product came along. I have seen products provide results that did not live up to the products' claims. That is not to say that these products were bad, but there is only so much that the public will bear in disappointment before they are turned off to the entire industry. As dermatologists, we have an obligation to remain objective. Over-the-counter products have a valued place in dermatology, but only if responsibly represented. Research on these products adds significantly to our profession, and it is encouraging to see that our pharmaceutical partners are now adding to our armamentarium of cosmeceuticals and, at the same time, performing solid testing on these products to quantify benefits in a scientific manner.

Finally, the public has come to believe that they are spending too much money on cosmetic dermatology treatments and in the dermatologist's office. This is why people now seek less expensive alternatives to achieve youthful looks. Although this is not bad if there is a reasonable alternative, many individuals now seem to be turning to the medspa model, found in strip malls

---

*Dr. Schlessinger is an advisory board member for Allergan, Inc; Medicis Pharmaceutical Corporation; and Stiefel Laboratories, Inc.*

throughout the country, where the owner is often absent and may or may not have a medical background. In Omaha, Neb, where I practice, there are at least 5 of these medispas, ranging from a national chain to a homegrown model owned by an absentee dermatologist who has physician assistants performing the various procedures.

If the objective is cheaper services, the goal has been met with botulinum toxin type A and fillers available at half price, as I see proclaimed on billboards. If the goal is keeping our patients' trust in cosmetic dermatology, the reality is sad and predictable. For patients who have come to me with botched fillers, unsuccessful laser hair removal, and permanent scars, and new patients who do not see the difference between medispas and legitimate medical venues, this is a side of cosmetic dermatology that will live on forever for some people, scarring them

and scaring them away from honestly delivered services for decades to come. Additionally, the ubiquitous availability of services not approved by the US Food and Drug Administration is setting the schedule for a disaster sometime in our future.

Yes, our profession is at a crossroads, but rather than surrender to the highest bidder and lowest common denominator, we need to continue to stress how we, as specialists in skin, hair, and nails, can add value, and then be sure that we follow through. Otherwise, the outlook for the future of cosmetic dermatology will be grim.

Joel Schlessinger, MD  
President, LovelySkin.com  
Omaha, NE

