

Picture This!

Skin imaging and before-and-after photos provide powerful visual aids for your patients.

By Darcy Lewis



A patient who seeks out your practice is clearly open to your recommendations and values your clinical judgment, but this may not be enough to convince her to sign onto a treatment plan. Absent a clear picture of how your proposed treatment could ultimately make her look, a new patient may be hesitant to commit. This is why before-and-after photography has become a staple in the medical aesthetic and medical spa industries. Additional tools offered by skin imaging systems, including subsurface UV photography and three-dimensional imaging can help reassure and instill realistic expectations in prospective patients.

Books of generic before-and-after images do have value as a waiting room tool, but many physicians find they are less effective than images generated within the practice. "Seeing someone else's pictures is not as engaging for my patients as seeing pictures of my work, so I have my own before-and-after images that I show to patients," says George Anterasian, MD, a head and neck surgeon at the Santa Monica Laser and Skin Care Center in Santa Monica, California. "Manufacturers have a vested interest in showing only the patients who have spectacular results, not necessarily representative ones. My photos give a more accurate representation of the results a patient can expect."

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In addition to their value as a conversion and marketing tool for prospective patients, before-and-after images also provide a good visual benchmark for both you and your patients. “Photos are an important part of the medical record—we have to know what the patient looked like prior to any medical intervention,” says Dr. Anterasian. “We all tend to forget what the baseline state was without a visual reminder, particularly with procedures that involve collagen remodeling and gradual improvement. Unless you have a ‘before’ picture, the patient might not realize how much benefit she’s received from the procedure.”

Dr. Anterasian achieves consistent images by using a digital camera on a tripod with a sitting stool in a dedicated space

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within the practice he shares with his sister, dermatologist Dr. Mary Lee Amerian. “I take all my own photos and find it takes me just five minutes to get six consistent views of the patient,” he says. In-office photo studios are a relatively inexpensive way to help patients track their progress,

BEYOND THE BASICS

Patients love to flip through before-and-after scrapbooks in office waiting rooms, but if this is the only place you’re using these images, you may be missing out on marketing opportunities. On our website, consultant Catherine Maley offers some innovative ideas on how to use before-and-after images to attract new patients and cross promote new procedures. You can download this free article at medestheticsmagazine.com

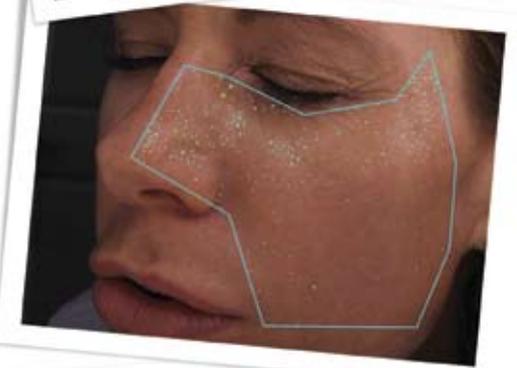
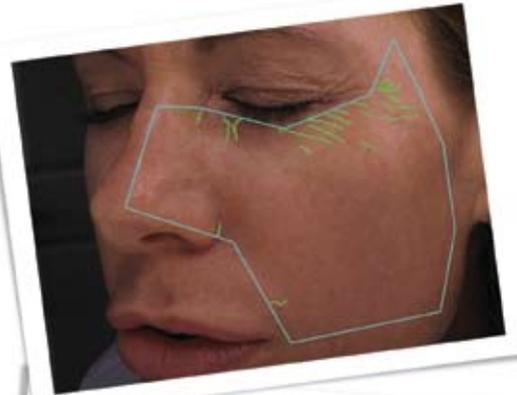
but in recent years, skin imaging technologies that offer a variety of skin analysis tools in addition to surface photography have been growing in popularity.

The Shift Toward Imaging

To date, thousands of successful medical spas and cosmetic practices have incorporated computerized skin imaging systems as a standard component of patient care. The multifunction software plays a role throughout treatment from the initial consult through post-care. Public interest

in these systems, which allow you to take standard before-and-after images in addition to illustrating a range of dermal characteristics like ultraviolet or vascular damage, P. acnes count, and wrinkle or pore size, soared following a 2008 appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

By all accounts, patients almost universally find their imaging experiences to be positive, even when they’re disappointed to see the amount of sun or vascular damage developing beneath their epidermis. “People are shocked but fascinated and they love the quantitative nature of my imaging system,” says Lisa Jenks, MD, owner of Genesis MedSpa in Colorado Springs, Colorado. “My VISIA system is part of every consultation we’ve done since opening two years ago, and it still amazes me how much more engaged patients become in their treatments when they can literally see the problems and their solutions.”



Skin imaging systems help to identify and track a variety of skin concerns including photodamage, pore size, wrinkles and vascular concerns.

Most manufacturers of skin imaging technologies offer multiple systems at a variety of price points. Virtually every system offers a fixed camera and facial positioning system to provide consistent before-and-after images. Subsurface and cross polarization technologies that capture underlying photodamage and pigmentation problems plus vascular concerns and acne lesions are also standard in most systems. More expensive units offer additional tools and upgrades that may include automatic masking that automatically delineates facial areas for ongoing analysis; personalized, printable reports complete with product and treatment recommendations; and 3D imaging that allows you to generate a three-dimensional image of the skin’s surface. One feature of today’s skin imaging systems that has cre-

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ated a lot of excitement among patients is the ability to “sculpt” potential outcomes of procedures like breast enhancement and rhinoplasty onto the patient’s own three-dimensional face and body images, allowing her to visualize the potential outcome of her procedure. Canfield Imaging Systems (www.canfieldsci.com) recently introduced Body Sculptor, a new addi-

seeing surface and subsurface images the patient may think I’m going to tell her that she has a lot of wrinkles and damage just to make more money. Instead, she sees it for herself.”

Still, Dr. Jenks stresses that the imaging system is a complement to her expertise, not a substitute. “I always tell the patient that we are

“Patients want to see what’s truly achievable before they sign on.”

tion to its VECTRA 3D imaging system with Face Sculptor and Breast Sculptor modules. Body Sculptor allows physicians to provide three-dimensional simulations of body contouring treatments as well as augmentation procedures. These tools often spur the patient to sign on the dotted line. Accordingly, providers encourage physicians to incorporate these technologies into their patient consults.

More Compelling Consults

“The main purpose of having an imaging system is to take the consult to a whole new level,” says Roy Wallace, president of Enhanced Image Technologies, manufacturer of the Image Pro II imaging system (www.enhancedimagetech.com). “That’s the ‘money time,’ when prospective patients are most willing to commit to a treatment plan.”

Jim Larkey, director of product management and marketing for Canfield Imaging Systems, manufacturer of the VISIA imaging system, agrees. “Practices that integrate imaging into their consultations reap a direct economic reward. Their revenues can increase from 15% to 30%,” he says. “You’re giving the patient a unique set of feedback she can’t possibly get from looking in her own mirror. You have the ability to show her the extent of her problems and what the outcomes of treatment modalities could be, personalized to her own face.”

“These visuals are compelling to the patients. They can see very clearly and objectively what needs to be done to improve their skin,” says Dr. Jenks. “Without

only using the imaging system and its skin database as a tool,” she says. “When a patient’s skin is analyzed, the system provides comparable rankings by percentage based on age, gender and locale. If the software places her in the 98th percentile for wrinkles, but her wrinkles are really bothering her, that’s what we’re going to focus on alleviating. By the same token, if the database says her wrinkles are more severe than average, but they don’t bother her, I’m not going focus on wrinkles in my treatment plan.”

Similarly, plastic surgeon Marc J. Salzman, MD, FACS of Louisville, Kentucky, finds that his imaging system gives him the chance to showcase his skills when the patient is most receptive. “Patients want to see what’s truly achievable before they sign on,” he says. “People have their own perceptions of what their faces or breasts look like. Being able to show a patient her own image with the eyelids lifted, for example, can really motivate her to book a procedure.”

Imaging systems can also help you manage patient expectations more effectively. “The patient expectation gap is getting wider because product claims are getting stronger. It’s easier than ever for people to misinterpret the benefits they can achieve,” says Laura Goodman, senior scientist at Procter & Gamble Beauty Skin Care (www.pgpro.com). “When a patient comes in to inquire about a procedure, you don’t know what her expectations are. Image analysis



Patients should be photographed from the same distance and angle with no makeup to capture effective before-and-afters.

helps bring her expectations to life, and then back to reality, so you can find a compromise on what is really possible.”

According to Wallace, one of most common questions he receives is: How much time will an imaging system add to my patient consults? “We find that performing the skin imaging adds about four minutes to the appointment,” he says. “But the resulting consults do tend to last a little longer because the patients are asking more questions based on the imaging results. This is quality time when they’re most receptive to your treatment plan, so it’s not necessarily a drawback to take that extra time.”

Jason Baechler, manager of sales and marketing at Moritex, manufacturer of the Clarity Pro skin imaging systems (www.moritexusa.com), notes that today’s skin imaging systems are designed to be user-friendly. “Anyone in the practice can be trained to use the system, and we often find that the nurses, physician assistants or estheticians perform the actual imaging. Once the system has analyzed

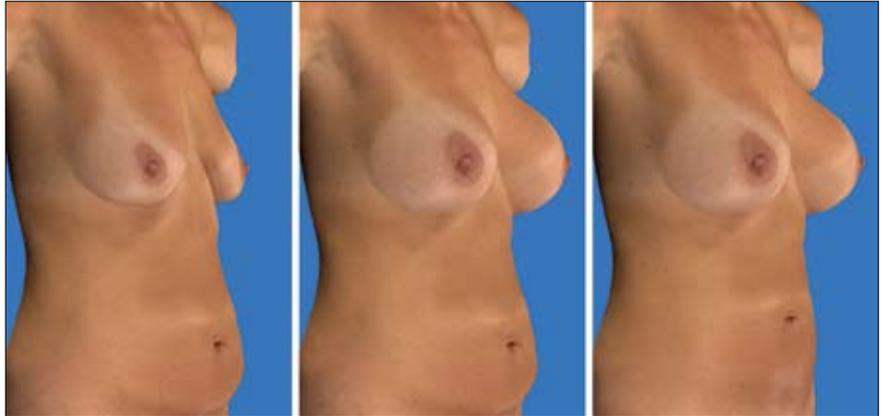
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the results, the doctor comes in for the consult and has this information available to go over with the patient," he says. The variety of tools available mean the software can be used to support skin care, dermal filling and surgical procedures. "All of these imaging systems are designed to be versatile enough to fit in with a wide variety of practices and procedures," says Baechler.

Capturing Quality Before-and-Afters

Whether you choose a skin imaging system, like Dr. Jenks, or a simple digital camera, like Dr. Anterasian, the quality and effectiveness of your pictures will only be as good as the process you design and the parameters you set for your staff.

"People are often surprised to hear that a trained staff is the most important variable of all," says Larkey. "We have customers who get some of the best photos in the industry using still cameras



Canfield's Body Sculptor is the latest 3D software that allows physicians to "sculpt" the patient's own image to illustrate possible outcomes of surgery.

Imaging systems offer unique tools to assist you and your staff in capturing consistent images. Mediscope's (Fotofinder, www.fotofinder-systems.com) Guided Photography, for example, features a virtual patient on screen to guide you through proper positioning for each series

a wide black or white headband to serve as a visual equalizer.

- **Jewelry.** It's best to have the patient remove all visible jewelry for both the before and after images. If that's not possible, have her wear the same—preferably low-key—jewelry for all photographs.

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because these physicians are exacting in their standards. And we have customers who invest significantly more money in imaging but end up with mediocre photographs because their staff training is lax, or they don't insist that their staff adhere to set procedures."

Dr. Salzman, who recently added a new imaging system to his practice, has found that there is no substitute for giving his staff a clear imaging protocol. "For several years I used a manual imaging protocol for myself and my staff," he says.

Like Drs. Amerian and Anterasian, Dr. Salzman set up an imaging area within his practice to capture before-and-after images of both his face and body patients. "I used a good quality 35mm SLR camera mounted on a counterweighted transverse beam and bracket similar to what a wedding photographer would use to ensure standardized composition," he says. "I was even able to morph the images for my consults by using a high-end Photoshop-type program."

of images. The photos are then automatically labeled by treatment and view.

Whether you're using an imaging system or digital camera, standardization of technique is key to obtaining effective before-and-after images. When you're establishing standards for your practice, consider ways to control these six variables.

- **Angle.** The patient should be photographed in the same position and at the same distance from the camera in each shot.
- **Background.** Nothing distracting, please: Avoid doorways, picture frames and medical equipment. Many practices hang a light blue, dark blue or black fabric backdrop in their photo areas to achieve a uniform effect.
- **Hair Style.** Ideally, the patient will wear her hair pulled back for both the before and after shots. Dramatic changes in hairstyle and/or hair color can be distracting and should be avoided. Some practices favor using

- **Lighting.** Again, consistency is key. Go for bright, even lighting that won't cast shadows.

- **Makeup.** A clean, makeup-free face is always best. For post-treatment photos, encourage the patient to bring in her skincare products from home and wash her face in the office prior to shooting to ensure a photographic match with the pre-treatment, before image.

Then get ready to reap the rewards of consistent, high-quality before-and-after images: higher patient satisfaction rates and a new avenue for good word-of-mouth referrals. "Patients love receiving prints of their pre- and post-treatment images so they can show their friends," says Dr. Salzman. "It's an inexpensive, yet valuable way to get great referrals." 

Darcy Lewis is an award-winning Chicago journalist specializing in healthcare and business topics.