



A Nonsurgical Approach

Head and neck surgeon Alexander Z. Rivkin, MD, left surgery behind to embrace and encourage innovation in noninvasive care.

By Inga Hansen
Photography by Richard Radstone



Upon entering Westside Aesthetics in Los Angeles, it's not uncommon to find Dr. Alexander Z. Rivkin, a pioneer in the field of nonsurgical facial enhancements, seated in the reception area discussing procedures with his patients. The Yale-trained head and neck surgeon put his scalpel down shortly after completing his medical training to focus his skills in the discipline of noninvasive care. "During my training when we studied aesthetic surgery, I always felt like these were big procedures for small gain," says Dr. Rivkin. "I thought that there were easier ways to achieve the results we wanted without surgery."

Following a short stint as an ENT physician, Dr. Rivkin opened Westside Aesthetics in Los Angeles in 2004, a business he began planning during residency. "I'd always had an eye on opening my own practice," he says. "I'd rather be creating something, making something new, than trying to fit into a group practice, and I was really interested in the field of noninvasive cosmetic work. I felt that this is where all the innovation was happening and that I could really contribute something new to the nonsurgical field."

Photo courtesy Carreah Laykin

A Nonsurgical Approach

The “Good Enough” Procedure

Just three years after entering the medical aesthetics field, Dr. Rivkin made his mark as a pioneer of nonsurgical facial enhancements, namely nonsurgical rhinoplasties, performed with a variety of dermal fillers. “My patients weren’t saying, ‘I want a perfect little ski-jump nose,’” says Dr. Rivkin. “They were saying things like, ‘I have this little depression on the side of my nose and I want to fill it out so it’ll look even.’” Where other practitioners would opt for surgery, he saw an opportunity to open cosmetic enhancements up to a new audience by using less expensive and less invasive dermal fillers to correct imperfections.

“One of the things the nonsurgical approach allows me to do is the ‘good enough’ procedure,” says Dr. Rivkin. “Not necessarily the perfect procedure, but the procedure the patient wants. Everybody does a little calculus regarding what they want and what it costs to get there in terms of financial cost, pain and downtime. The nonsurgical approach makes these procedures more accessible, and it’s nice for me because I’m dealing with more regular folks who come in with very realistic goals.”



The son of an entrepreneur, Dr. Rivkin began planning his practice during residency.



A close friend of Dr. Rivkin’s volunteered her nose for the doctor’s first efforts. Television appearances coordinated with the help of a public relations firm got the word out in Los Angeles. “As soon as people saw that it was possible to do this, it just clicked,” says Dr. Rivkin. “People understood, of course, this is how it should be done.”

Today he works with dermal fillers Radiesse and Artefill to reshape noses, jaw lines and cheek bones, and add volume to the undereye area without surgery. “Realistically, Radiesse only lasts about a year,” says Dr. Rivkin. “So I have patients do Radiesse first. If they’re happy with the results we can redo the procedure with Artefill, which potentially lasts forever.”

To date, Dr. Rivkin has performed close to 300 nonsurgical facial enhancements.

To date, Dr. Rivkin has performed close to 300 nonsurgical facial enhancements with Artefill with no complications. He is currently involved in a study with Suneva Medical that involves visually tracking Artefill patient through photographs and monitoring for adverse reactions for 18 months. “Artefill is a gradual filler that you layer over the course of three to five treatments,” says Dr. Rivkin. “On one hand it’s a little frustrating because the patient does need to come in for multiple procedures; on the other hand, this makes the procedure very safe because you’re not going to overfill.”

The procedure works by taking advantage of optical illusions that affect how we look at the face. “If you have a bump or something that makes the nose irregular it focuses people’s attention on the nose, making it look bigger,” says Dr. Rivkin. “What I’m doing is adding to the nose but I add to a certain part of the nose; this makes it look smaller. Things aren’t necessarily what they appear, and you can take advantage of these optical illusions to give your patients the results they want.”

“This Shouldn’t Be a Stressful Experience”

Initial publicity surrounding Dr. Rivkin’s nonsurgical enhancements helped drive patients to Westside Aesthetics,

A Nonsurgical Approach

but it's word-of-mouth that keeps the business growing. An entrepreneur at heart, Dr. Rivkin focuses on creating a stellar experience that will encourage patients to share their experiences at Westside with friends and family.

Hardwood floors, dark wood furniture and a warm, open reception area greet patients when they enter the ground floor office just blocks from The University of California, Los Angeles. "The practice has an open layout that allows patients to mingle with me and the other staff members," says Dr. Rivkin, who oversees a staff of 11. "We wanted to create a relaxing atmosphere so patients wouldn't feel as if they were at a doctor's office. This shouldn't be a stressful experience." Patients wait in a central reception area before being ushered into one of four treatment rooms—the injection room, laser room, esthetician room or the VelasMOOTH

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room. A special VIP waiting area stands off to the side of the reception room, separated by a heavy white curtain that can be dropped down to give celebrity patients privacy before and between treatments.

"This is the more service-oriented end of medicine. You have to be nice and you have to give patients a good experience," says Dr. Rivkin, who cites his mother, also an entrepreneur, as his biggest influence. "She was an esthetician in



Early television appearances followed by word-of-mouth helped drive patients to Westside Aesthetics for nonsurgical facial enhancements.

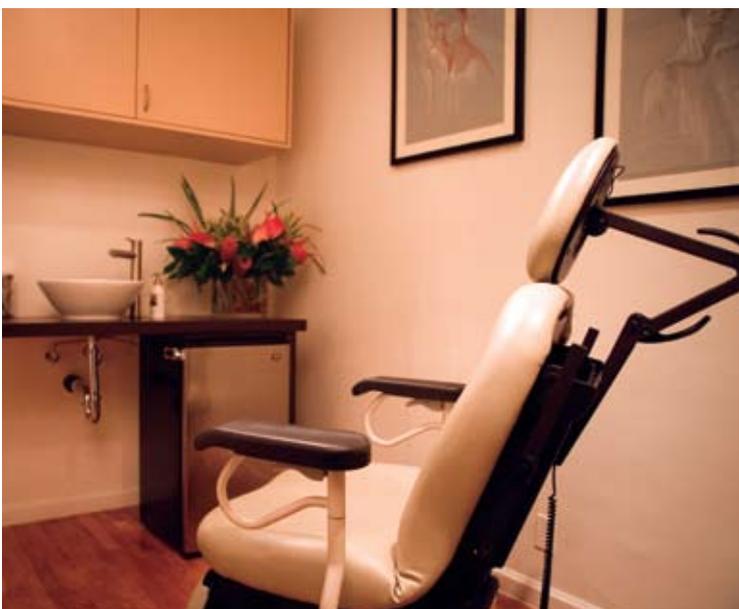
Russia, and when we came to the United States she opened a salon that she ran for 25 years," he says. "I was there all the time growing up so I'm very comfortable with skin care and esthetics, and I was very comfortable with the idea of running my own practice."

“I Train Their Judgment”

In addition to creating a relaxing décor, Dr. Rivkin takes pride in offering "as pain-free an experience as possible," he says. "This is why I take injection technique and training so seriously. I do believe that temporary and permanent fillers are the future, and it's great to see them expanding. But they are not self-explanatory. Physicians owe it to their patients to view these procedures as a separate specialty, not just a new treatment they're adding to their menus."

Registered nurses at Westside offer Botox Cosmetic, fillers and laser treatments. Staff estheticians offer patients a variety of facials. "I want to make sure everything that happens here is done according to my standards, so the estheticians and I develop the facials together," he says. "I also set limits on the intensity of the peels offered by my estheticians. My staff is very professional. They know their limitations as well as their skills, which is important."

Dr. Rivkin works side by side with new R.N.s until he feels comfortable with both their technique and judgment. "They watch me inject and then I watch them inject; I find that it's always more beneficial to do things live," he says. Part of new employee training involves examining different scenarios. "I ask 'What would you do in this situation? If the patient asked you this, what would you say?' Then I get a



A Nonsurgical Approach

sense that I've trained their judgment, because that's the most important thing," he says. "I need to know they're not doing the wrong thing in the wrong situation. So the length of training really depends on the individual."

In addition to managing Westside Aesthetics, Dr. Rivkin is the medical director of Veronica's Medical Spa in Malibu. "I go up to Malibu once a week on Wednesdays and see patients there. My registered nurses also work at the Malibu office offering laser treatments and Botox injections," says Dr. Rivkin.

"The Days of the Grand Surgeon Are Ending"

Dr. Rivkin offers laser procedures, in addition to a wide variety of injectables, and, like many practice owners, he finds the challenge of choosing new equipment second only to hiring and managing employees. "The biggest challenge for me has been finding people who are qualified in terms of their training, skills, and their personality," he says. "Is this personality right for this type of practice and is it right for this specific practice?"

"Trying to determine what is and what is not an effective device is another interesting intellectual challenge," he says. "So many of these laser systems make promises they unfortunately

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can't fulfill." Fractional resurfacing is one procedure that has proven popular at Westside. Dr. Rivkin works with the Fraxel re:store nonablative system (Solta Medical) and the Active FX CO₂ ablative laser (Lumenis). "It's not easy to find effective devices, but these are two of the most effective systems," he says. "The treatments are intense, but when performed carefully with attention to skin type, they are safe and effective, and my patients see real results."

A trend Dr. Rivkin believes will be shaping the future of noninvasive cosmetic care: "The days of a patient entering the office of the grand surgeon, and the surgeon determining what will be done, are ending," he says. "Cosmetic patients are becoming more empowered, and our industry is becoming more responsive to market demands."

Fillers that focus on longevity of results with low in-



Westside Aesthetics features an open floor plan that allows patients to mingle with staff members.

cidences of side effects will fuel the move away from an aesthetic ideal, as patients seek services that give them a more natural and ethnically sensitive appearance, believes Dr. Rivkin. "Even in surgery we're seeing a more ethnically sensitive approach to cosmetic procedures," he says. "This has been a big part of the popularity of the nonsurgical enhancements as well. People can actually hold the mirror while I inject and see what's happening. They help guide me in creating the look they want."

"I'm very excited about the future of noninvasive aesthetic procedures. As we've suspected all along, it is an area that keeps expanding," he says. "We keep finding new techniques and indications, especially for fillers and botulinum toxins. There have been turf battles between specialties, but I think it's good that we have so many specialties within noninvasive medical aesthetics—this is what allows for so much innovation."

Operating in a competitive environment like Los Angeles has added to Dr. Rivkin's business challenges. "We have cosmetic practices, medspas, mall spas and even mobile practitioners," he says. "I would love to cooperate with non-cosmetic dermatologists and plastic surgeons where we could refer patients to each other, but I've found that people are very concerned with patient flow, so they want to offer everything. I feel strongly that you can only be good at a finite number of things. Your patients are better served if your efforts are focused. For me this has meant focusing on nonsurgical procedures, because I think they are the future." ❏

Inga Hansen is the executive editor of MedEsthetics.