

ON THE

CUTTING EDGE IN THE HEARTLAND

By Jackie Summers
Photography by James Visser

Hands-on patient care, solid values and a wide-angle view of industry products and procedures place Skin Specialists, P.C. in Omaha, Nebraska, in a position of national prominence. Led by Joel Schlessinger, MD, the practice combines state-of-the-art treatments and procedures with never-out-of-fashion service and follow-through. More than a dermatology practice, Skin Specialists, P.C. includes Aesthetica Day Spa, Advanced Skin Research Center, and www.LovelySkin.com, an online skin care product resource. The busy, multifaceted practice blends Midwestern values and an innovative approach to dermatology.



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Dr. Schlessinger works closely with PA Jackie Clegg, who has been with his practice for more than 10 years.

For anyone who hails from the Midwest, interacting with the friendly, responsive staff of Skin Specialists in Omaha is like coming home. Office manager Marie Savine accommodates a request for an interview with gracious efficiency. Skin Specialists director Joel Schlessinger, MD, arrives for scheduled appointments on time and fully prepared. Like so many heartland professionals, he's considerate, thorough and unpretentious.

His busy 12,000-square-foot facility is designed for efficiency and convenience with locked cabinets for supplies and medications in each treatment room, a parking garage under the first floor and large skylights for natural light throughout. A separate day spa entrance lets that part of the operation offer extended hours, and a separate entrance for the Advanced Skin Research Center allows patients enrolled in clinical trials to check in quickly for routine appointments.

Standard Setter

Like most effective leaders, Dr. Schlessinger sets the tone and standards for his practice, and these have led to a culture of ethics and accessibility. Last year, the medical practice treated between 20,000 and 25,000 patients, and the research facility, staffed by 10 full-time employees, ran anywhere from 20 to 25 concurrent studies on treatments for psoriasis and acne, dermal fillers, three new neurotoxins and more.

Combining medical research with patient care is strictly by design. "The research offers a wide-angle view of the field that leads to a better ability to adapt to changes and new trends, while the clinical practice serves as a feeder for cosmetics and

research," says Dr. Schlessinger. "Many patients migrate from one to the other."

He moves from medical dermatology to cosmetic procedures to research throughout the day. "My staff manages me well," he laughs, reflecting on the logistics of his schedule. "It works like a well-orchestrated ballet."

Admittedly, each segment has its financial pros and cons. "There's a lot of overhead with the research," Dr. Schlessinger explains, "but it keeps us on the cutting edge and that's a huge benefit for our patients." And although it's time- and cost-intensive, he feels strongly about the importance of maintaining the vibrancy of his medical and surgery practices. "I've heard of many colleagues who, when the cosmetics take off, forget about the medical," he says. "They say, 'That's the last wart I'll ever see!' But when the economy hits a dip, the number of cosmetics patients drops and they have to reopen the medical practice, which can be difficult to restart." In addition, Dr. Schlessinger asserts that the medical and surgical aspects offer the credibility and experience that a practice needs to bolster the cosmetics side. "If I do a laser procedure, I know how to take care of the skin before and after, day in and day out," he says. "And we've been doing fillers, Botox Cosmetic (Allergan) and lasers since the early 1990s."

Excited About Skin

Dr. Schlessinger launched his solo practice in 1993 after re-routing a medical career that originated in pediatrics. After earning undergraduate and medical degrees at the University of Rhode Island, Brown University Medical School and Baylor College of Medicine, he embarked on an internship and residency in pediatrics at the University of Alabama Children's Hospital. During a dermatology rotation in the second year of pediatrics, he began to reevaluate the specialty he had focused on since he was five years old. "I loved dermatology!" he says. "I hadn't given it a second thought until then, but after spending hours in the emergency room observing the strange rashes that the kids came in with, I was hooked." He completed his board certification as a pediatrician prior to a dermatology residency at Barnes Hospital at the Washington University of Medicine in St. Louis.

Looking back, he recalls, it was veins that led him to the next step in his career.

"During my dermatology rotation in my pediatrics residency I worked with a mentor on leg veins, Dr. Barry Ginsburg who taught me sclerotherapy, among other things," he explains. "Because of my pediatrics background, I was pretty good at getting the IVs and needles into the narrow veins and became known for the skill. The nurses would line up and have me do their veins, which continued into my dermatology residency. There I got most of the leg vein patients and I came out of my residency with a built-in practice-maker. That put me on the radar screen once I started my practice in Omaha."

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When Dr. Schlessinger and his wife Nancy settled in that Midwestern city, one happy accident aided the launch of the business. Because he missed the Yellow Pages deadline by a week, he turned to newspaper ads to promote his fledgling practice. "It was unusual," he says, "but it worked, and we developed rapidly." Today, Dr. Schlessinger continues

regular advertising in local newspapers and on radio and billboards. He uses television to recruit patients for clinical trials.

He recognized the power of the Internet early on. The Skin Specialists website (www.joelschlessingermd.com) launched in 1997 to help direct patients to the practice and build name recognition. At the same time, he created a site called Lovely Skin (www.lovelyskin.com), an e-commerce skincare store that offers brands like Obagi, Procyte, Jan Marini, Colorescience, and RevaléSkin. "Lovely Skin is a labor of love, but not very profitable," Dr. Schlessinger admits. "Yet we realize the importance and convenience to our patients of having their products available to them any hour of the day."

Dr. Schlessinger also relies on several professional online networking sites for vital colleague interaction. He names Rx-Derm and Derm Chat as "unique and incomparable additions to my life as a dermatologist." These sites, he says, provide him with opportunities to compare cases and life experiences with and solicit advice on business matters unique to the profession from more than 1,500 dermatologists across the country.

Today, Skin Specialists thrives with a staff of 40, including seven department managers and three estheticians, seeing patients that Dr. Schlessinger refers to as "the antithesis of the Beverly Hills population." Soccer moms, teachers, managers and professionals from Omaha's thriving agricultural and insurance industries have been loyal Skin Specialists patients for 15 years and, says Dr. Schlessinger, they come "simply because they want to look better." Business is steady—he reports little impact from the current economic downturns—but just in case, with typical Midwestern pragmatism, he keeps his prices reasonable and always saves for a rainy day.

Ethical Balance

As the leader of Skin Specialists and as a founding member and past president of the American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Aesthetic Surgery, Dr. Schlessinger holds firmly to ethical practices in his profession. Much of his time as ASCDAS president was devoted to exposing the challeng-



In addition to an extensive retail area in Aesthetica Day Spa, clients can purchase products online from LovelySkin.com.

es of Lipodissolve, the unregulated injectable that claims to dissolve fat and often leads, he says, to complications such as scarring, bloating, lumpiness, nausea, general malaise and more. He was also involved in launching a bill in the Nebraska legislature to bring Lipodissolve regulation to the state.

As an industry spokesperson, he often puts forward his belief that medspas are most successful when they are structured as true medical-based operations.

At Skin Specialists, he walks his talk. For example, Jackie Clegg has served as his physician's assistant for more than 10 years, and the pair work in tandem. "In some practices, the PA functions on a parallel track and his or her patients never see the doctor," he explains. "I have very strong opinions against that. I see every patient that comes to the practice. Jackie and I see patients together and it works well because we both pick up different things and the patient benefits. But I do all of my own Botox Cosmetic and filler injections, laser and liposuction procedures, and Mohs surgery—and that's important. So many practices delegate these procedures to physician extenders, but I think the patient comes to the practice for the doctor. Extenders can do a great job, but I feel that my relationship with patients is critical. Many practitioners don't realize that by working with a physician extender in this way, they can see the same (if not more) patients together as the two could see separately—and the patients reap the benefits of both their skills."

His "big picture" perspectives on medspas, along with his own experiences, have also led him to emerge as a proponent of conservative customization in the medspa field and an opponent of a cut-and-dried approach to aesthetic renewal. "All too often I see patients from other practices who display an unimaginative approach to the use of cosmetic procedures—like doing a tummy tuck when liposuction would have been fine or a full-face laser resurfacing when Botox Cosmetic, IPL and fillers would have been better," he says. He believes in looking at each patient with a fresh perspective each time they visit to keep the approaches suitable, realistic and varied. Paraphrasing the Bernard Baruch quote, he notes, "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

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The third plank of Dr. Schlessinger's philosophical professional platform centers on training. Fully training all staff members pays off in terms of the quality of patient care, he believes. It also creates an environment where people feel confident in their jobs and their professional knowledge, and leads to long-term employee retention. His practice has benefited from staff continuity at a time when other medspas report that finding and keeping good employees is their greatest challenge.

Forward Thinking

While the here-and-now presents limitless reasons for contentment and gratitude, Dr. Schlessinger also looks to the future with eager anticipation. He reveals that his research team is working on several new developments for the treatment of psoriasis, acne and eczema that could change the parameters of care for

each. He's also excited about new developments in neurotoxin formulas, dermal fillers and lasers. He feels that tools like Smart-Lipo (Cynosure), VelaShape (Syneron) and fractional lasers are already making life better for doctors and their patients.

Dermatologists have always been innovative, he muses. When dermatology started as a specialty in the early 20th century, it was a field for the study of sexually transmitted diseases. From there it has evolved to the study of skin diseases, skin-related treatments, skin cancer, laser technology and now cosmetic treatments. "This spirit of innovation is what makes it exciting to go to work every day," he says. "We're on the cutting edge." 

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