

Battling snake oil salesmen

Skin renewal business grows to 14 branches with 180 staff, but now faces dodgy practitioners muscling in, writes **Shirley le Guern**

THE aesthetics sector – or, to put it more simply, providers of non-surgical, anti-ageing cosmetic procedures – is much like the cellphone or computer industry where, as technologies become more accessible, services become increasingly affordable.

At the same time, celebrities and the media are popularising procedures such as the injection of neurotoxins such as Botox and fillers, facial peels and laser treatments, boosting demand for anti-ageing remedies.

"Sophisticated technology is not only available to the ultra-rich, but is now being used by Joe or Jill Average," says Victor Snyders, the joint owner of Skin & Body Renewal with his wife, Maureen Allem.

Over the past nine years, the two have built their business from a start-up in a small house in Parkhurst, Joburg, to 14 branches employing more than 180 people (including 16 doctors).

They opened their first KwaZulu-Natal branch in Gillitts this week.

However, while plumping up demand might be good for business, Snyders is sceptical about the side effects for patients and legitimate businesses such as his.

The problem, he says, is that as the market for cosmetic procedures grows, so does greed and the number of dodgy operators.

"It is no different from bringing in grey or counterfeit goods such as handbags. It's one thing buying a knock-off Gucci handbag, but illegitimate products involving such things as Botox can be dangerous."

Right now, in South Africa, the only barrier to entry in the aesthetics sector is cost. It is an unregulated industry with little or no training.

Snyders says appeals for regulation and requests directed at the Medicines Control Council to investigate dubious procedures or even tragic "accidents" seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

He points out that Botox might be a wonder drug, but it is also a scheduled one that needs to be administered by trained medical people able to handle any unexpected problem.

Although it is rare, there is always a risk, as with most tried and tested pharmaceuticals.

The "snake oil salesmen" that he readily denounces are those who are bringing in illegitimate products at ridiculously low prices or even buying from anonymous dealers via the internet.

Makeshift laser machines, usually manufactured in China, India and Korea, are not properly



Botox injections and the use of inadequate laser machines can be harmful and give the aesthetics industry a bad name, say the owners of a chain of practices.



Victor Snyders and Maureen Allem of Skin & Body Renewal... it's not only the rich trying to look younger, it's Mr and Mrs Average.

calibrated and can have devastating effects that might not be medically correctable. He says they sell for about R600 000 as opposed to the R1.5 million invested by credible operations.

Cut-price Botox – which can be contaminated or incorrectly diluted – can come at a quarter of the conventional price. Cut-price operators who even throw "Botox parties", which are catching on, are becoming increasingly high-risk.

"This gives the industry a bad name. There are good aesthetic practices in South Africa, but there are also shockers. But this is not just a generalisation about South Africa. There are also problems worldwide," he says.

The crucial difference is that US authorities such as the Food and Drug Administration are taking imports of unapproved and contaminated products seriously.

In the past year, about 350 doctors and practices in the US

have been warned about receiving dubious Botox or fillers. Penalties for illegal imports are similar to those for bringing in heroin.

Apart from professionals risking lawsuits and criminal prosecution, the effects on patients have been well publicised.

In 2004, a scam involving prominent physicians saw them convicted on federal conspiracy charges for bringing in fake neurotoxins.

Patients injected with about \$1 million in cut-price products were temporarily paralysed after contracting botulism.

In South Africa, the unknowns start with the size of this rapidly evolving industry. Most local practitioners refer to the American sector.

According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, last year Americans spent almost \$11 billion on cosmetic procedures. Non-surgical

procedures accounted for 83 percent of the total: \$2bn was spent on injectable procedures, \$1.8bn on skin rejuvenation procedures and \$483m on other non-surgical procedures, including laser hair removal and laser treatment of leg veins.

Cosmetic, minimally-invasive procedures increased 10 percent in the past year, with almost 12.7 million procedures in 2012.

The most popular was the injection of Botox, which apparently applies to South Africa too.

According to the Aesthetic Guide of April this year, to which Snyders refers, manufacturers of cosmetic neurotoxins sold products worth \$1.1bn last year, with global sales expected to rise by 6.8 percent a year to reach more than \$1.5bn in 2017.

Earnings increases from similar treatments in South Africa, which come off a far lower base, could outstrip these.

Snyders and Allem believe demand is the result of an environment where looks increasingly count.

Advances

For example, jogging and gym were virtually unheard of in the Seventies.

Instead of seeing more bored housewives come through the door, they say growth is coming from increasing numbers of businessmen and women.

Women comprise 80 percent of clients, with the greatest growth segment being black men.

Allem believes treatments boost self-esteem not only personally, but professionally. "Many of my patients want to remain relevant and competitive in the workplace against younger women and work well into their 60s."

Treatment, Allem says, is specific to a patient's needs and is closely linked not only to identifying underlying serious medical issues such as thyroid problems in mature women, but also to an overall wellness or a holistic health programme.

The couple recently opened a sister company, Health Renewal, to facilitate this.

Both are adamant that the latest technologies and advances in aesthetic procedures should be available in South Africa and that the industry needs to be professionalised – something the increasing numbers of dentists, general practitioners and pharmacists offering Botox are hampering.

"A dentist is not a skin specialist," says Snyders, adding that in many instances doctors and dentists have trained for just a day in a field with which they were not familiar.

He says many dentists, doctors and pharmacists have seen reduced medical aid tariffs and the advent of discount pharmacies by big retail brands have a negative impact on their businesses, so they have resorted to offering quick-fix cosmetic procedures to boost business.

Even legitimate suppliers of products, whose margins are being squeezed through competition from illegitimate operators, are turning a blind eye to push volumes, he suggests.

"We put much of our success down to staying independent. Many operations are tied to a specific product range or equipment manufacturer.

"Our independence means that we have no outside shareholders who have decision-making power. What we offer is based on what works for a patient and not on a strategic alliance," he says.