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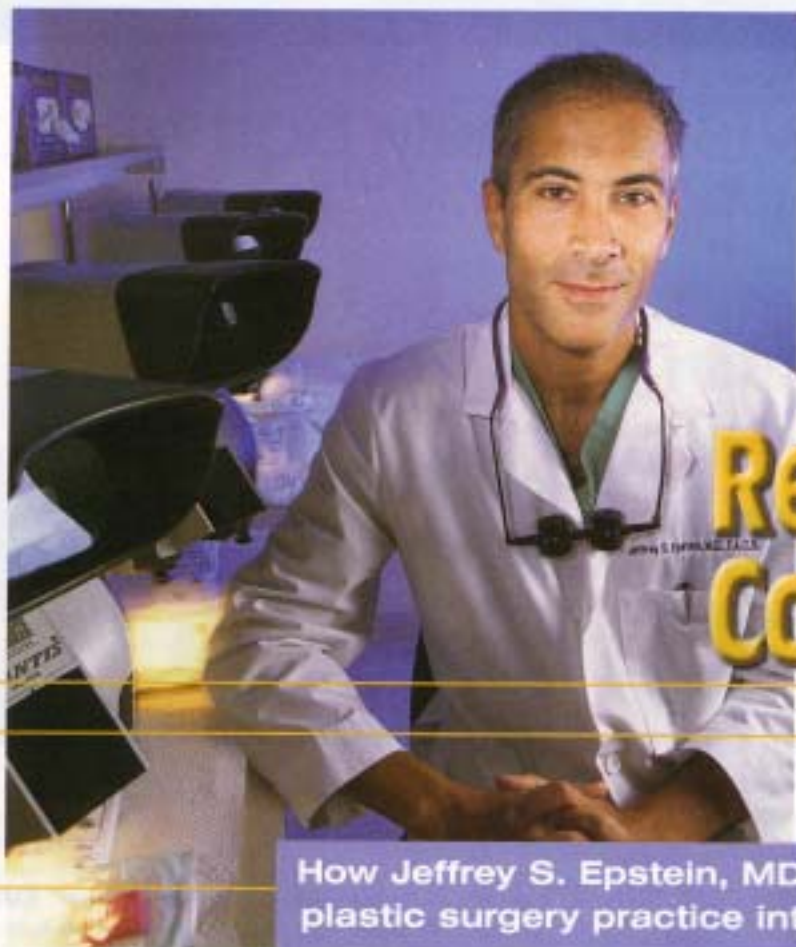
## Restoring Confidence

*How Jeffrey S. Epstein, MD, FACS, transformed a facial plastic surgery practice into a hair restoration success*

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# Restoring Confidence

by Rashida Syéd

**How Jeffrey S. Epstein, MD, FACS, transformed a facial plastic surgery practice into a hair restoration success**

It was during his residency at the University of Miami that Jeffrey S. Epstein, MD, FACS, received his best career advice: "I knew I wanted to do a fellowship in facial plastic surgery and one of my professors, an old-time facial plastic surgeon, said, 'Pick one thing and do that one thing better than anyone else, and you will always have a rewarding career.' He suggested that I focus on hair, and, of course, I said, 'You must be crazy.'"

Despite his initial reservations, Epstein took that advice and has not looked back. He completed his residency in 1993 at the University of Miami in the Department of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery. He went on to complete a 1-year fellowship through the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery under the direction of Sheldon S. Kabaker, MD, in the Bay Area of northern California. Returning to Miami in 1994, Epstein then joined an existing practice for 2 years until he went out on his own in July 1996.

When Epstein started his solo practice, his ultimate goal was to establish himself as a top-notch hair transplant surgeon who also performed facial plastic surgery. He already had a significant patient base, but for the first 2 years, some of his patients still came to him for general otolaryngology services. "It was a double-edged sword because in the beginning it helped cover some of my overhead [costs], but on the other hand, it made it a little more difficult to get out of doing general ear, nose, and throat (ENT)," he explains.

Epstein admits that the practice mix of a small amount of ENT patients, mixed with some facial plastic surgery and hair restoration did not give him the autonomy or the name recognition he desired. His decision five years ago to leave ENT behind helped him focus on hair restoration. "To me it is a perfect procedure. It fits my personality and my personal approach," he says. "It is meticulous work that requires a team approach; it is a low-risk procedure; and it let me stand out a lot earlier than if I had tried to work my way up with a general facial plastic surgery practice."

## Practice Details

Epstein's practice, called the Foundation for Hair Restoration, has its main office in Miami with a second office for consultations in Boca Raton, Fla. According to Epstein, very few plastic or facial plastic surgeons in private practice call hair restoration surgery their primary specialty, a fact that has contributed greatly to his ability to carve out a comfortable niche. Epstein also attributes a great deal of his recent success to the advent of follicular unit micrografting, which he adopted nearly 3 1/2 years ago. This relatively new technique, in which the surgeon removes a single strip of donor hairs from the back or sides of the scalp and places microscopically dissected grafts of hair in the recipient site, produces a virtually unde-

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tectable appearance and has made a big difference in the quality of results Epstein has been able to offer his patients. "While it is a much more labor-intensive technique and a more demanding procedure, my practice went from doing one or two hair cases per week in 1999 to four per week in 2000. Now, I do seven or eight hair cases a week," he says.

Epstein notes that follicular unit grafting is the technique of choice in more than 95% of all the cases he sees. The use of microscopes, he says, reduces the damage to the donor hairs and yields as much as 20% more hair growth. Additionally, the transplantation of small grafts, or follicular units, in naturally occurring bundles of one to three hairs each in this approach means less scarring, quicker healing, and more natural results.

Men make up 90% and women 10% of Epstein's practice. "Men's hair loss tends to be more dramatic, although for women with hair loss, it can be more traumatic. Yet, women are much more savvy about hiding it. They are more likely to color their hair or style it with hair additions or hair-pieces," Epstein says.

"A lot of [women] do not know what is available. I am not saying that hair transplantation is right for all of them, but certainly, there are a fair number that can be helped," Epstein says.

Epstein says his background in facial plastic surgery boosts patients' confidence in his work. "I believe there is a sense of security that comes from having a procedure—even though it is "only" a hair transplant—performed by a doctor with an aesthetic surgery background. It is only after a surgery residency that one can appreciate what can go wrong, and more importantly, take all the steps to help prevent it," Epstein explains.

Although Epstein receives requests from some of his patients to perform additional cosmetic procedures, he refers many patients to other qualified plastic surgeons who specialize in the procedure requested. While Epstein still enjoys doing some facial plastic surgery procedures, such as rhinoplasty, he still refers patients for two reasons: first, he wants a practice devoted to hair restoration; and second, the referrals he receives from other plastic surgeons are invaluable to his practice's bottom line.

"Some of the top plastic surgeons send me all their hair work, and I make an effort to send them patients who request procedures in which they specialize. I know the kind of patients they are referring to me, and I want to reward them with like-



*Epstein examines a patient in consultation for a hair transplant procedure.*

minded patients who are really looking for doctors who will provide the best results," Epstein says. "I think it says a lot to send [patients] to another plastic surgeon who specializes in one or two procedures."

### The Beginning Stages

Epstein has gained a lot of knowledge in the 9 years since he finished his fellowship, particularly about building a one-specialty practice. Yet, when he decided that he would focus on hair restoration during his residency, Epstein had little experience in the field. So, how did he become one of the most noted hair restoration surgeons in such a short time? Epstein had the opportunity to be immersed in hair transplant procedures during his 1-year fellowship. His advice for physicians who have decided to specialize in hair restoration is largely the same.

Epstein suggests that physicians interested in specializing in hair restoration, who already have an existing general plastic surgery, cosmetic surgery, or ENT practice, spend a minimum of 3 months with a hair specialist. He also advises these physicians to become members of the International Society of Hair Restoration Surgery and to spend 2 to 3 weeks in an intensive observational workshop with at least three top hair surgery practices. After learning techniques from several different physicians, Epstein says that one can begin to craft personal techniques.

After establishing reliable techniques, Epstein suggests introducing the procedure to the practice by finding two or three patients seeking hair restoration and charging them a nominal fee for several procedures of about 500 to 600 grafts at a time. Although it will take a year or more for significant results, the novice hair restoration surgeon can cultivate these patients as showcases for his work, if the results are good. Patience, however, is the key, a virtue that few new physicians have, according to Epstein. "So many physicians do not get the advice that some of the old time doctors dispensed to me, and that is that it takes typically 8 to 10 years before you start hitting your stride. Then, it is in those next 10 to 18 years in practice that you really blossom. Your fruit will come to harvest, but you have to be patient."

The skill and reliability of one's staff also become extremely important when embarking on a specialized practice. "If you are going to start offering hair restoration procedures, hire an assistant that has experience doing hair transplants and then have them train one or two of your other staff members, and start out with smaller cases," Epstein advises.

One lesson that Epstein learned early on was that it was more cost-effective to maintain a practice with one specialty that would generate consistent revenue, as opposed to offering several different plastic surgery procedures in addition to hair restoration because of the varying costs involved. "The overhead required for a hair practice is much greater than that for a facial plastic surgery practice in terms of manpower. So, if you are really going to do hair, you cannot afford to do a lot of plastic surgery because when you do an eyelid surgery, for instance, you might need just two assistants. [Then you have



*Using microscopes, technicians separate grafts containing one, two, or three hairs, for transplanting.*

to figure out] what to do with those other five full-time assistants needed for the hair restoration procedures," Epstein says. "From both a professional perspective and a financial perspective, it makes sense that once you have a hair practice, you should concentrate on doing hair."

### Building a Practice

When Epstein began his private practice, he was able to pay off all his loans within 3 months, which he attributes to a healthy level of modesty. "One of the keys in the beginning was not being too extravagant. I think one of the mistakes a lot of young physicians make is they pour all this money into capital and a beautiful office," he says. "While you do need a nice office, it does not have to be a shrine. In fact, in many ways it is inappropriate for a young physician to have a shrine. Build up your reputation first by the work you do. There's plenty of time down the road to spend lots of money on your practice."

Epstein suggests building an operating room in the beginning, along with renting, instead of purchasing, office property, something he has done since he went solo. Also, hiring the very best staff members, including experienced medical personnel and a professional front office staff, is something that should not be compromised. Epstein believes that the quality of his staff makes his practice unique. "What makes my practice special is the way my staff treats patients. They are professional, and they make the patients feel like they are the most important people in the world," Epstein says. In addition, the entire office staff is bilingual, English/Spanish, providing a comfortable environment for the 25% of the practice's patients who travel from Latin America for procedures.

Customer service is much more than sending out gift baskets, according to Epstein, who routinely calls his patients the night after surgery. He also has his office staff call patients the following day. While many practices like to hire counselors to conduct their patient consultations, Epstein feels more secure doing his own. "I think patients really like the fact that I sit down with them for 20 minutes [for a consultation], or contact them through email to let them know when they send me their pictures that they are actually going to be speaking to me. I welcome all my patients to call me," Epstein says.

He also has quarterly meetings with his office manager to find out what more he and the entire staff can do to meet patients' needs and desires. Epstein recently completed a survey, which was sent out to 250 of his patients, to determine their overall opinion of their experience and their results. According to Epstein, 95% of all of the patients who received hair transplant procedures at his practice said that the experience was extremely satisfying and positive. Still, he acknowledges that the number one thing patients look for is the quality of results.

### Making Your Mark

Epstein generally feels that advertising is a bad way to market a private practice. During the first year of his practice, however, he hired a public relations specialist, a decision for which he has no regrets. "I think [public relations] can be good if you have a story to tell. It can benefit your practice to get those stories out earlier than later, because once you get patients from those initial hits, they are patients for life," he explains.



Roxana, office administrator, and Cindy discuss cases for the next day with Epstein.

Today, the only direct advertising Epstein employs is in the Yellow Pages®, although he acknowledges that the expense of maintaining his advertisement has continued to rise, while the numbers of patients who come to him as a result of seeing it have decreased.

Epstein says that most of his patients learn about the practice from physicians, other patients, and through the Internet. "I think over the past 3 years that the sophistication of Internet marketing of hair practices has been so far ahead of what plastic surgery practices are doing to promote themselves on the Internet. There is a lot to be learned," he says.

Epstein has his own website ([www.foundhair.com](http://www.foundhair.com)) that he considers to be professional and informative, but he credits the few Internet directories of which he is a part for generating much of the traffic to his site, and subsequently to his practice. One website, in particular, is hosted by the International Alliance of Hair Restoration Surgeons, a consumer quality organization of physicians spawned by Spencer Kobren, a lay person who wrote a book called *The Bald Truth*. Kobren maintains the site, and physicians pay to keep it running. In turn, they are listed among the top providers of hair restoration procedures.

While Epstein shuns advertising for the most part, he is thankful to some of the larger hair transplant clinics who long ago went public with infomercials and other forms of advertising. "People learn about hair on an infomercial, then they go to the Internet and do their homework. Between the advertising of [popular hair regrowth drugs] and big hair transplant clinics, it has done a lot for everyone in terms of building up the field."

### Hair Horizons

According to Epstein, little in surgical technique has changed in the past 4 years of hair restoration, which he feels is testimony to the success of the follicular unit grafting procedure. He thinks that in the next 2 to 4 years, the hair restoration field will see only minor changes in the procedures available, including adjuvant therapies that will improve the growth rate of hair after transplantation and speed up the healing process. People will also likely see new topical medicines that stimulate hair growth more effectively than the systemic medications available today.

Further down the line, Epstein believes that scientists are likely to figure out ways of cloning hairs, or multiplying cells from the hair follicle in a laboratory that can then be injected into the scalp in larger quantities. Gene therapy, another likely advent of ongoing medical research, is also on the far horizon, Epstein says. ■

Rashida Syéd is a contributing writer for *Plastic Surgery Products*.