

executive lifestyle

saving face

Aesthetic clinics are flourishing as people who don't need or want plastic surgery seek alternative solutions, reports CHEAH UI-HOON

WHOD go for facials these days, when lasers are so much more effective?" wonders a 41-year-old lawyer who has been badly burnt before. "At \$300 a pop, lasers regenerate my skin, while facials only deal with the surface!"

Having just discovered Ultegra (a version of IPL or Intense Pulsed Light) and Laser Genesis for her sun-spotted complexion and aging skin at Catis Medical Laser Clinic, after years of hand and fancy-mass facials at a beauty salon, she's one of the many who are making use of the 21st century's answer to younger and better looking skin.

It's little wonder that aesthetic clinics are flourishing in Singapore, with more converts like this lawyer (who wishes to remain anonymous) who belongs to a growing group of people who don't necessarily need or want plastic surgery but who find that they need more effective solutions to their aesthetic problems.

"Ten years ago, there were very few aesthetic clinics around, if any," says Ivan Tan, who runs Nu Reflections medical aesthetic clinic in Tampines, which he started in 2000. "You'd either go to a beauty salon or see a plastic surgeon, in the more extreme of cases. There was a big void."

The beauty clinic run by doctors is much more comprehensive these days, of course, and they're going head-to-head with the beauty salons - which is also opening the skies of the beauty game with its use of machines and gadgets. An increasingly competitive market and more advanced technology are driving the growth of aesthetic clinics, practitioners say. And the time is right for established names to start opening branches overseas as well, it seems.

Venturing into China

The Shuang Clinic, which started in 2003, has just added a plastic surgery arm and is even looking at breaking into the China market.

"When we first started, we focused on non-invasive treatments," says Low Chai Ling, who started the clinic with her husband, Kenneth Low. "As we grew our customer base over the years, we realised that our patients were asking for more advanced solutions, and plastic surgery was the next logical step."

This year, they partnered plastic and reconstructive surgeon Yan Ying Chen to open The Shuang Plastic Surgery Clinic at Novena Medical Centre. The reason that they partnered Dr Tan was in part because of his reconstructive surgery skills, says Dr Low. "That's an extremely useful skill, as we do offer our own services on Sundays. We work with patients who've been in road accidents or need reconstructive surgery of some sort."

The market is more saturated now, she points out, with many private, stand-alone clinics so others such as hers are being pushed to move a step up by expanding vertically. "We've been increasing the range of our services, we want to move into education and research, and will probably conduct clinical studies in the future. Moreover, we're also looking for a suitable site in Kuala Lumpur, and expansion plans are underway in Vietnam and China."

The increase in numbers takes on a natural "snowball effect," she notes. "We might face a learning curve for our first or second branch clinic, but then we find the right template and process. After that, it's pretty much standard, so it's not difficult to replicate."

To back this, she reveals that the clinic's business started just a few months ago - has already broken even. "We were approached by investors overseas, so at first we were cautious, but now, having found the right partners, we're going ahead."

TCS Clinic at Central is another new aesthetic clinic, and its unique point is that it has an aesthetic dentistry arm. "We added two new partners who are aesthetic dentists so that we can offer an integrated range of services. We see quite a bit of demand in the area of dentistry," explains Chew Yien Ho, who used to run TLC at Fair East Shopping Centre for three years, before opening TCS Clinic this year.

The move to Central was also to tap the lifestyle vibe there. "We could have opened in Novena Medical Centre, but we preferred to just ourselves in a non-clinical setting - where our clients can enjoy the sky garden, have access to F&B outlets and so on."

Customers themselves have gotten more discerning and cost-conscious, Dr Chew notes. "People are also more open about sharing their minimally invasive procedures, so the mindset has changed significantly in the last five years." Newer surgical techniques are less down-to-earth than in the past has also fueled more interest and acceptance, he says, citing TCS Clinic's forte which is double-eyelid operations. "Newer techniques are definitely making things easier and less dangerous."

Growing appetite

Says Calvin Chan of Catis Aesthetic & Laser Clinic at Woodlee Plaza: "This appetite for cutting edge medical aesthetic treatments is what has really driven growth in the industry along with the evolution of the treatments themselves to become more comfortable, with little to no downtime and yet producing natural, significant improvements to problems like sagging skin, acne, sunning, wrinkles, pigmentation."

The clinics saw growth even during this year's economic slowdown, says The Shuang Clinic's Dr Low. "There was a slowdown, sure, but it dropped from the previous very high rate, so there was still demand."

For a sample view of double-eyelid at such clinics, TCS Clinic's patients can range from as young as 15 years old to people in their 50s, with over 70 per cent being women. The male group tends to be in their 20s and 30s.

The beauty and aesthetic market is definitely extremely competitive now, Dr Chew agrees, but recent Ministry of Health (MOH) guidelines have made a clearer distinction between those who are qualified and those who aren't. "In the past, there was some uncertainty as the public didn't know who could do what."

Now, however, MOH has clearly stated that surgery should be done in an ambulatory or day surgery setting



Body beautiful: (Clockwise from above) Beauty clinics in Nu Reflections specialise in non-invasive body contouring, partnered a plastic and reconstructive surgeon to open TCS Clinic's unique offering in its aesthetic dentistry arm.



ing, and Dr Chai joins the growing list of those who've done so. "It does indeed go a long way to establishing and reinforcing the branding of the clinic and services. It also distinguishes what the clinic has to offer from what other practices may offer and an industry that already has many players," he says. Since 2003, it has eight aesthetic doctors in Singapore have also moved lines to their names.

As for recent controversies in the field - think unapproved stem cell treatment and complaints such as burning of the skin - they have, in turn, generated interest in the professional aesthetic clinic, says Sylvia Hameed of Catis Medical Laser Clinic which only uses FDA-approved treatment and equipment. "These controversies have actually helped our clinic considerably as patients are more discerning when selecting aesthetic treatments and providers. We have taken care of several patients who have complications from services received elsewhere," she notes.

And as for expansion, the aesthetic clinics do operate on the same wavelength as other medical clinics - as in patients decide on the clinic because of the doctor, she thinks. "During the consultation process, the patient forms a bond with a particular physician and gains confidence in their skills. Also, the doctor's experience and expertise with the particular technology can make a big impact on results," she points out.

Having a "versitically integrated" practice may work in some instances, but not in others. "Nevertheless, this demonstrates that both the patients and the clinics are evolving into a more mature and sophisticated aesthetic community," she feels.

With aesthetic clinics mushrooming, the Singaporean consumer should be happy - knowing that they will always have a choice of where to go depending on what their expectations are, how much they want to spend, and how much discomfort they can tolerate.

doctors are going head-to-head with beauty salons, investments such as laser lipolysis, The Shuang Plastic Surgery Clinic, TCS Clinic's unique offering in its aesthetic dentistry arm.

what it involves more than saw live of fat removal, these eye-lifting liposuction need special licensing. But beauty salons can't handle lasers and lipolysis although they can do IPL treatments.

No Reflections' Dr Tan argues that the aesthetic clinic isn't competing with plastic surgery clinics, but the beauty salon instead. "Plastic surgeons' forte is in doing surgery, while what we do is non-invasive. So in that, we're quite similar to beauty salons." He ventured into the field because he saw a big need for it - having seen patients who've had burns from poorly administered IPL and laser treatments. Of course, he also deduced that there must be a big market if beauty salons consistently took out advertisements to test their services.

No Reflections' speciality is non-invasive body contouring treatments, such as laser lipolysis. Dr Tan is also using out a new machine called the Acoustic Wave Therapy (AWT) machine, invented by Sheri, which had created a machine to break kidney and gallbladder stones with ultrasound technology.

"When the AWT was created to treat arthritis and joint pain - doctors found that the texture of the skin improved and cellulite was minimised. It's called acoustic wave, because you can actually hear it, as opposed to the so-called ultrasound. "But it takes a shorter time to work because it's higher intensity, and weeks later, the skin's cellulite condition continues to improve," he explains.

Something else that aesthetic doctors are doing is to make their own skincare line, a move which helps brand-

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Ten quick beauty fixes

WANT to get a fix for Christmas? These are top 10 quick beauty fixes that you can expect to find at aesthetic clinics.

- 1. The Matrix Fractional Laser Rejuvenation Treatment**
This is one of the best treatments to improve the texture and quality of the skin. Thousands of microscopic holes are drilled into the skin to allow the skin to renew itself and to reveal a totally new and rejuvenated skin. It is \$520 @ Nu Reflections
- 2. The Radio Frequency Face Lifting**
The deep penetrating radio waves reduce fat under the skin and achieve an overall slimmer and firmer skin to give it a face-lift effect. From \$50 @ Nu Reflections.
- 3. Cosmelan**
For an effective and pain-free depigmenting treatment, 1/4 as effective than Cosmelan. \$1,200 per session @ TCS Clinic.
- 4. Ultherapy**
Ultherapy is a breakthrough procedure that uses medical ultrasound for non-surgical non-invasive improvement of the skin. Ultherapy works deep below the surface. From \$3,000 @ The Shuang Clinic.
- 5. Titan treatment**
The Cosma Titan is an all-natural option to enhance skin tone. Titan uses light energy to heat the dermis deep beneath your skin's surface. Tightens skin and stimulates collagen. From \$999 @ Catis Medical Laser Clinic.

- 6. Laser Genesis**
Treatment of wrinkles and redness, management of large pores and skin texture. From \$225 @ Catis Medical Laser Clinic.
- 7. Pearl treatment**
Pearl offers the most effective treatment to address fine lines and wrinkles, sun-damaged skin and uneven texture without any cuts and the lengthy downtime required with traditional Erbium and CO2 laser procedures. From \$2,300 @ Catis Medical Laser Clinic.
- 8. DST Double Eyelid Surgery**
Dr Richard Yeo is the only doctor in Singapore to be trained personally by Dr Akhram Mianzi, the inventor of this method, at his Japan surgical centre, and he has since performed more than 200 successful procedures. Prices start from \$1,888 @ TCS Clinic.
- 9. Body and Face Contouring Treatment**
The Smartlipo Laser Lipolysis destroys fat cells. This is an ideal treatment for specified areas such as double chin, chest and arm areas. From \$2,200. The Vaserliposculpture removes up to 1000cc of fat per session. From \$3,500 @ Nu Reflections.
- 10. PlasmaLipo PelliBodyToning**
The next wave in lipolysis, PlasmaLipo PelliBodyToning uses fat cells with plasma light energy in targeted areas such as abdomen, upper arms, chin and cheeks. From \$1,500 @ TCS Clinic.

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