



# CAPITAL Career

By Linda W. Lewis • Photography by Mike Morgan

Tina Alster, MD, has operated the Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery for more than 16 years and is one of the best known cosmetic dermatologists in the world. A graduate of Duke University Medical School, she completed her dermatology residency at Yale University and a dermatologic surgery fellowship in Boston. She is a fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), the author of six textbooks and more than 250 journal articles, and the recipient of numerous honors including the prestigious Goldman Lectureship Award from the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery in 2001. In January 2007, she talked about her climb to the top of her profession, her recent move into a new facility, and her thoughts about the past and future of medical aesthetics.



▲ Dr. Tina Alster works with a patient in her new laser center.



▲ At the time of our photo shoot, Dr. Alster was just moving into the new facility. The space was workable but the walls were still bare.

“I never desired a general dermatology practice,” explains Tina Alster, MD, “but when I began in 1990, there were no freestanding laser centers as there are now. Other doctors told me I would have to do general dermatology to survive in private practice.”

Not one to be deterred, on July 4, 1990, Dr. Alster subleased a small space on the second floor of a 10-story office building located between her home in Georgetown and George Washington University, where she taught some classes. “I was determined to have a cosmetic practice and began by concentrating on the laser treatment of birthmarks and scars. Because of my specialized train-

ing in laser surgery, I was asked to consult for some laser companies and expanded my services as new lasers became available,” she recalls. Within a few years the Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery occupied the entire second floor of the building.

“The hardest thing starting out was that I had no one to call when I had a question. I pursued the cosmetic practice because I had a passion for the work, and in 1994 that passion, hard work and a little luck propelled me to where I am today,” says Dr. Alster. The luck came in the form of an article in the *Washingtonian*, a monthly lifestyle magazine serving 400,000 residents in and around

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the nation’s capital. “As a result of that one article, my business went from being 90% birthmarks and scars and 10% cosmetics to 90% cosmetics and 10% birthmarks and scars.”

There might have been some luck involved, but becoming the “it” girl in her profession was really more about the passion and the hard work.

“Before that *Washingtonian* piece, I wrote many

press releases about new techniques that I helped develop in an attempt to build my business,” she relates. “I tried working with publicists but found I could do it more efficiently myself. I delivered numerous lectures at professional meetings, universities, hospitals and lay groups. Because my husband was an ambassador in Prague, I had the additional opportunity to lecture all over Europe, bringing



▲ Decor in the new facility is modern, almost stark in its simplicity.

laser technology to a broader audience. The time spent on transatlantic flights enabled me to write and edit journal manuscripts and books. And I spent a lot of time running all those pages through FAX machines that routinely jammed. I think now, what a wonder it would have been to have had e-mail then!"

The Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery includes a large research facility where Dr. Alster and her staff carry out studies for major companies in the medical aesthetics industry. In addition to researching new laser applications, she was also among the small cadre of dermatologists who performed the original clinical studies with Botox (Allergan) and new fillers for FDA approval. She currently serves as a consulting dermatologist to Lancôme, assisting with new product development and industry

direction. She even holds patents that led to the development of the popular BooBoo Buddy Cold Packs and BeautyKool Masque, products created to help patients better cope with laser and other surgical treatments.

"I've always felt a little guilty about not pursuing academia," she reveals, "but in the early days of my career no one wanted laser surgeons. Now everyone wants one. I receive emails constantly from department heads begging for trainers."

### Second Story

After 16 years in the office building where she started, Dr. Alster moved her entire operation to downtown Washington, DC, in January 2007. "I loved the original location and we had plenty of space, but I wanted to own my space, and buying just my floor wasn't possible in that building. Besides, the

building was already 20 years old and beginning to show its age," she says.

"The problem was finding space one could purchase in downtown Washington," she continues. "I didn't want to move out to the suburbs; I'm a city person and being downtown was more convenient for me and my clients. My business was too big to try to combine it with living space. It took three years of looking to find just the right opportunity."

Dr. Alster's Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery is now located just two blocks from the White House on the second floor of another 10-story office building that sold space floor by floor like a condominium. "It's a beautiful, modern, glass-front office building on K Street, a major thoroughfare in the middle of a burgeoning business area," she says. "And it's only 10 minutes from National Airport. I

highly efficient group and most people play multiple roles. Elizabeth Tanzi, MD, who is now co-director of the Institute, came to us as a laser fellow five years ago. Georgina Eva, my office manager and team leader, has been with me nearly since the beginning, and my five medical assistants have been with us for as long as 12 years. The only place we have turnover is in reception," Dr. Alster notes with satisfaction.

Perhaps because of the low turnover, the business has no formal hiring and training programs. "Georgina and one of our seasoned medical assistants train any new additions to the staff, and rookie assistants start by working with Dr. Tanzi, who is a more patient trainer than I am. Assistants only work with me once they are thoroughly up to speed," says Dr. Alster.

"The industry still has a lot of growth potential. What we see now is just the tip of the iceberg."

bought the second floor because I had recognized the advantage our second-story offices offered clients who are accompanied by secret service personnel. Being on the second floor meant they could utilize the back stairs and avoid the elevator. I see heads of state, royalty and many members of the Senate and House. We are a bipartisan business." Dr. Alster continues, "The whole second floor is only 6,000 square feet, a little smaller than the space I previously leased. To be sure I wouldn't outgrow it, I also took some square footage on the first floor. When it turned out I didn't need that space, I decided putting offices in a prime storefront property would not be cost effective. Instead, I decided to open a high-end gift shop there. Now, I know very little about retail other than that I'm a shopaholic, but I recognized that the downtown area could use a shop that handled unusual, one-of-a-kind gifts. Of course, I will sell a limited amount of skin care; I'm working with some vendors who are packaging products exclusive to Après Peau, the name of the shop. And I'm working with distributors and artists who will provide unique items so that a special gift can always be found. Après Peau is scheduled to open February 1, and I'm excited about showing it to my friends while they are here for this year's AAD meeting."

### Inside Look

"My staff is really small—just 12 to 15 people—especially considering everything we do. It is a

"Our most popular treatments are Fraxel 'people ask for it by name' Botox and fillers," she relates. "I continue to treat a multitude of birthmarks and scars; we get referrals from all over the world for our expertise in this area, including those injured in war-torn Iraq. We have all kinds of laser systems and offer a wide variety of services.

When it comes to the new permanent fillers, Alster is cautious and selects patients judiciously. "I use longer lasting implants like Radiesse for prominent nasolabial folds and to add volume to the cheek regions, but I prefer collagen for lips and hyaluronic acid fillers around the eyes and mouth," she says. "You need a whole arsenal of fillers to meet the needs of your patients, and I often use more than one type on a single patient."

What does she think the future has in store for medical aesthetic businesses? "The industry still has a lot of growth potential," she says. "What we see now is just the tip of the iceberg. Everyone talks about the baby boomers driving business, but many GenXers are also jumping on the bandwagon. These services are a part of their everyday culture. They are not as reluctant to try these procedures as those in my generation; there is no taboo."

Not everything is rosy, however. Dr. Alster is concerned about how cosmetic services will be

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viewed by the public if the industry isn't properly overseen. "The unfortunate thing about having all these reality shows and so much media coverage on cosmetic services is that people fail to recognize them as medical procedures," she explains. "All kinds of people from different backgrounds are entering the field and many are not getting the training they need. It is important to emphasize that we are practicing serious medicine that requires proper education and training."

Personally, she plans to keep on working in the field she loves. "It is hard to remain at the forefront of one's profession and to keep ahead of the curve," she notes. "I look back and remember thinking I was really good 10 years ago, but because we learn best by doing, I know I am much better now than I was then. I train one carefully selected fellow annually and a host of other physicians who qualify through mentorship programs (such as the Women's Dermatologic Society and the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery) on a case-by-case basis." All of her training slots are filled through 2008.

"Those just beginning their practices now look at my life and call it glamorous, but it is all based on hard work," concludes Dr. Alster. "I typically work all day in my practice and then write articles between midnight and 2 a.m. I could never have done what I have without the support of my wonderful husband and son. They allow me to pursue my profession to its fullest, and neither makes me feel guilty about my schedule." ❁

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