

Dr. Battle (left) and Dr. Harris are involved in every aspect of Cultura. They're often seen helping patients or taking calls in the reception area. ▼



Cultura Connection

Eliot F. Battle Jr., MD, and Monte O. Harris, MD, combined their expertise in dermatologic surgery and facial plastic surgery to develop Cultura—The New Face of Aesthetic Medicine. The 3,000-square-foot storefront location in a busy Washington, DC, shopping area offers an integrated approach to rejuvenation that combines dermatology, cosmetic laser therapy and plastic surgery with luxury spa treatments.

By Carol Phillips

Tucked away, right off one of Washington, DC's most prominent streets, is the brainchild of two progressive, passionate doctors—Eliot F. Battle Jr., MD, and Monte O. Harris, MD—the dual driving force behind Cultura. Doctors Battle and Harris met while lecturing at the National Medical Association Joint Session of Dermatology and Plastic Surgery. After attending each other's lectures, they knew they had met for a higher purpose.

"I had been keeping an 'idea' notebook tucked away with my thoughts and plans for the ideal medical business model," says Dr. Harris. "After hearing Dr. Battle lecture, I realized the natural synergy between our philosophies."

Dr. Battle vividly remembers the meeting. "We each took out our business idea books and started trading information like kids trade baseball cards," he says. "It was as if both of us



Cultura Connection

had the ideal baseball trading card collection with only one or two key cards missing. One had the Babe Ruth and the other had the Rogers Hornsby.”

Monte O. Harris, MD, is a board-certified and fellowship-trained facial plastic surgeon. He is considered a pioneer in comprehensive cosmetic facial rejuvenation for individuals with darker skin tones. Eliot F. Battle Jr., MD, is a cosmetic dermatologist and laser surgeon. He is regarded as one of the world’s premier laser surgeons and an authority on cosmetic laser therapy on darker skin types. His laser research at Harvard helped to pioneer the new

Cultura’s storefront location is just minutes off Embassy Row in a busy shopping area. ▼



generation of safe, noninvasive cosmetic lasers.

Unique Service Proposition

One way to set your medical spa apart from the pack is with a connection to cutting-edge technology. Being the experts on lasers for women of color has put Cultura on the media fast track. Programmers are always looking to interview experts. Dr. Battle has been featured in numerous magazines, including *Time*, and on TV shows such as *Good Morning America* and *20/20*.

“One key issue we both knew in our hearts was that women of color have been overlooked in the burgeoning spa market; yet women of color have distinct needs,” says Dr. Harris. “There is a disparity in healthcare today for women and especially for women of color.”

Cultura patients receive a 30-minute consultation with the doctor. “We sit with them and really listen to goals and concerns. It’s amazing how quickly a patient opens up to us within the consultation. Many have never had a doctor spend that much time with them,” says Dr. Harris. “Most medical doctors do not

have the luxury of a 30-minute, face-to-face consultation, given the state of healthcare and HMOs.” Cultura is a totally pay per service business that takes no insurance. A 30-minute consultation fee is \$100.

“When we first started the business we were a 60/40 split, with 60% of our patient base being upscale, Caucasian females. As our reputation as experts on treating women of color spread, the patient population began to shift. We are still at a 60/40 split, but now 60% of our patients are men and women who have African, Latin, Middle Eastern, and Indian backgrounds. The staff reflects the natural diversity of their patients.

“Cultura is about learning what makes the skin unique, and how to treat the differences,” says Dr. Harris. (On their service menu you will see Complexion Blending, which is not on many medical spa service listings.)

Multifaceted Approach

Cultura offers an innovative approach to rejuvenation by integrating dermatology, cosmetic laser therapy and plastic surgery with luxury spa treatments.



Patients develop a relationship with the entire team of 20 service providers, receiving skin-care product recommendations, aesthetic services, and then, if needed, physician care.

The Cultura Integrated Approach (CIA) is a heartfelt mission to help patients achieve the best aesthetic care, bearing no resemblance to the other Washington, DC, institution with the same initials. CIA combines physician-directed skin care, nonablative cosmetic laser therapy and minimally invasive plastic surgery to assist patients in their desire to age gracefully. This innovative

concept was specifically fashioned to be safe and effective for patients of all skin tones and ethnicities.

The five-phase approach begins with a computerized complexion analysis. This is followed with recommendations on how to blend the complexion, reduce wrinkles, repair sun damage and treat other skin problems. Phase three focuses on pampering procedures that will lead to clinical results, such as customized facials and peels, or body treatments. Phase four includes cosmetic laser therapy for skin rejuvenation, hyperpigmentation, broken capillaries, hair removal and other conditions. Finally, phase five offers minimally invasive approaches to cosmetic surgery. The Cultura Approach for surgical facial rejuvenation consists of small operations packaged to rejuvenate for areas where early facial aging is most evident, notably the eyes, cheeks and neck.

Accessible Positioning

When the two met, Dr. Harris was teaching in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Dr. Battle was at Harvard in Boston, but both were able to relocate to any city in the U.S. They considered Houston, Atlanta and Chicago, but decided Washington, DC, was the ideal city for launching their dream. “One thing that drew us to DC was that it offers a blend of cultural activities and outstanding universities, which is a natural parallel to medical science-based services and the softer spa aesthetic side,” says Dr. Harris.

Cultura’s location is within 10 minutes of Embassy Row, about 20 paces off Washington, DC’s shopping mecca, at 5301 Wisconsin Avenue. The 3,000-square-foot storefront location was a former day spa with a built-in reception desk, treatment rooms and retail space that saved the

CIA combines physician-directed skin care, nonablative cosmetic laser therapy and minimally invasive plastic surgery.

The entrance at Cultura houses attractive displays of a wide range of medical grade cosmeceuticals. ▼



▼ The decor is modern, clean and attractive. Dr. Harris chats with two members of the medspa’s ethnically diverse staff. ▼



Cultura Connection

doctors hundreds of thousands of dollars on their initial build-out. You can park on the street or in the adjacent parking garage and be at the reception desk within 20 steps.

Many medical offices have the “glass slider wall” and doctors are rarely seen in the reception area. Not at Cultura. You frequently see both doctors behind the reception desk, escorting patients to the front to select skincare products or fielding phone calls.

Photo: Mica Morgan Photography



Spa amenities are evident everywhere. ➤

Retail is one leg of the three needed for success. Patients need at home that support efforts in the treatment rooms. Both Dr. Harris and Dr. Battle personally hand-pick the best of the best. On the shelf you will find a wide collection of medical-grade cosmeceuticals, maybe not the entire line, but the ones they feel will work the best for their patient base. Today 20% of Cultura’s gross sales are from retail and Cultura will be launching its own brand of skin care in March 2006.

Business Acumen

“Running a business that is involved with medicine is difficult,” says Dr. Harris. “Doctors typically have not been trained in business and the financial people who are investing in medical spas typically do not know medicine. I have the advantage of having worked as an international marketing director at IBM before going to medical school.”

“One key area that many people

who are jumping on the medical spa bandwagon do not understand are the costs of setup and creating ongoing business,” says Dr. Harris. “This includes your upfront, getting in the door dollars and what it takes to create a revenue stream, especially if you are starting without a patient base. If you have the luxury of a patient base, you still need to consider how much it will cost to convert them to medical spa services. We did not do a lot of advertising upfront, because we didn’t know what we were doing. We wanted to get in and get our feet wet with this brand-new business model. We chose the slow and steady course vs. coming out with guns blazing. It worked for us, but we did not draw a salary for six months while building the business.”

“One thing we learned early on is that we had to become the experts,” says Dr. Battle. “You cannot totally rely on the education you receive from any of your product and equipment vendors. You will need their support, but



Photo: Mica Morgan Photography

On the Menu at Cultura

The top five services at Cultura are:

- Facial hair removal, \$350 (full face and neck)
- Facial complexion blending, \$350 to \$500 per treatment (comparable to light-based facials at other medspas)
- Botox, \$350 per site
- Dermal fillers (Restylane and Captique), \$600 per cc
- Scar reduction treatments, \$250 per 15 minutes

For more information visit www.culturamed.com.

A spacious lounge includes lockers for clients who want to change into robes and slippers ▼



becoming the expert will take a commitment of time and money to research and study all the information that is out there on medicine, spas, medical spas, skin physiology, cosmetic chemistry—even retail management.”

Dr. Harris agrees and continues, “The true sign of an expert is demonstrating that the understands his own limitations. Medical spa owners and physicians need to understand and educate themselves on the medical treatments, risks, complications and their limitations. As a doctor or medical spa service provider you must learn when to say ‘no’ or ‘enough is enough’. We have turned patients down when they insisted on procedures that we felt would not be safe or appropriate. We are a boutique practice; we do not want to be all things to all patients. We understand our limits and are very comfortable referring out.”

This is even truer for physicians entering this arena who are not dermatologists or plastic surgeons, says Dr. Battle. “General physicians by no means have an in-depth knowledge of skin. Dermatologists and plastic surgeons receive an additional three to four years of specialty training. In medical school they will teach you the medical pathology of skin 101, but there is not

a course on what to do to improve skin that is not diseased.

I serve as Assistant Clinical Professor, Department of Dermatology, Howard University Hospital. The dermatology residents actually do rounds in our practice, which affords them the opportunity to see real-world skin care,” he notes.

Both doctors advise those entering medical aesthetics to walk before trying to run. “Start with a small, limited scope of practice,” says Dr. Battle. “Be somewhat narrow-minded with how many procedures you offer. Minimize the skin types you are treating. Start with lasers for Caucasian and then work into the darker skin types. With enthusiasm, training and time, you can add procedures. You do not have to launch with a full-blown menu. At Cultura all we do is skin. We do not offer hormone therapy or weight-loss counseling. We will not become a wellness center. This allows us to focus our resources of time and talent.”

Next Step

It is apparent that both doctors have a burning desire to improve the industry. They are treating patients who have been misinformed or not informed at all about the medical spa procedures they have experienced in other facilities. “As physicians, we are very scared at the evolution of medical spas. We want to help create a benchmark of excellence,” says Dr. Battle. The two will be opening a training facility in some time this year, adjacent to their successful, growing spa, to help standardize the quality of care patients receive. ♣

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