

More Than Skin Deep

By Betsy Allen

With the first warm, soft days of spring upon us, dermatologist Dr. Michael Todd of the Skin Cancer Center of Northern Virginia is mindful of a cold, hard fact: "Skin cancer is much more common than people realize," he says. "One out of five people in the United States will be diagnosed with skin cancer (during their lives)."

The best way to improve chances for long-term health, Dr. Todd points out, is to schedule a yearly skin exam by a dermatologist. During an exam, you'll be checked for the three kinds of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma.

Dr. Todd urges people to protect themselves from the sun with clothing, hats and sunscreen, and to have a suspicious or new skin spot checked. "Do the things you love to do - just be smart about it. If you're reading a book at the beach, sit under an umbrella. It doesn't have to ruin your life."

Now, you might expect to hear these things from a dermatologist. But you might not anticipate hearing comments like these from patients who have visited his office:

"To tell the truth, I was kind of looking forward to it."

"There was no pain at all."

What really sets Michael Todd's practice apart is the ability to go beyond the technical and the practical - it's the deeper commitment to the patient, the dedicated effort put into meeting not only that person's medical needs, but their emotional ones as well. This is a top priority both for Dr. Todd and his entire staff.

Dr. Todd says he was attracted to dermatology because it spanned a wide range of medical disciplines, like immunology, cancer care and surgery. "You treat a wide variety of people - kids with rashes, teens with acne, adults with skin cancer," he says. "The variety really drew me to it."

The Skin Cancer Care Center, which was originally located in Sterling, moved to Lansdowne three years ago. With the new facility, great care was given to the center's décor and atmosphere. The sage green and cream-colored drapes, furniture, walls and carpeting have a very serene and peaceful look that helps put patients in a calmer state of mind.



While awaiting the results of a Mohs lab process, patients spend time in the comfortable, peaceful waiting room, where they can sit, talk, read, play cards, or grab a refreshment from a mini-fridge.

"The idea behind the design was just that skin cancer surgery is a stressful experience," Dr. Todd explains. "We try to help people relax. We make it as stress-free as it can be. It impacts everything we do -- from the first phone call to the nurses and how they interact, how they greet and bring the patients back, how I discuss things and answer questions."

Much of Dr. Todd's business comes from dermatologists who refer patients to him, especially in cases that involve the face and neck. His specialty is Mohs surgery, a technique invented by surgeon Dr. Frederic Mohs that allows microscopically precise control over how much tissue is taken for sampling and tumor removal. It is especially preferred for skin cancers on the head and neck because it tends to minimize the amount

of tissue removed and thus allows the best cosmetic result. Even more important, the use of precise microscopic analysis helps give it the highest overall cure rate of skin cancer treatments.

The Mohs procedure involves removing tissue and, while the patient waits, freezing a section at temperatures around -25 F. The hard sample is then cut into very thin pieces, and the slices are placed on microscope glass slides and stained. Dr. Todd can then examine the sample under a microscope, carefully checking the margins, to see if all the skin cancer was removed. "We take the smallest possible section, which takes less tissue and leaves a smaller hole, and has the highest cure rate," he explains.



Dr. Michael Todd loves his staff. "It's the best crew we've ever had," he says. "It takes years to find the right people." Back row, from left, Michael Fraykor, PA-C; Jackie Thomas, medical assistant; Michelle Garritty, LPN; Virginia Mosely, RN; and Dr. Todd. Front row, from left, Debra Melisi, RN; Debbie Rowley, office manager; and Lynda Barnes, receptionist.

In the procedure rooms, patients can listen to their choice of a myriad of XM Radio channels. During the Mohs lab process, which takes about an hour, patients can wait in a comfortable waiting room with couches, tables and chairs, playing cards, and a mini-fridge stocked with refreshments.

Linda Bergman, a database manager from Manassas, came to Dr. Todd with a squamous cell carcinoma on her face that required surgery. She e-mailed to get an appointment, and the center set it up immediately. "I e-mailed them that I was scared out of my gourd," she says. "Someone called me and said, 'Don't be afraid. Dr. Todd will take good care of you.' And he didn't hurt me - there was no pain at all." In fact, while waiting for the Mohs lab process, Linda and her husband managed to get in a few hands of poker. "It's just a really good experience when you go there," Bergman says. "Even the other patients are nice."



Dr. Todd checks the findings of a Mohs process in the lab facility of the Skin Cancer Center of Northern Virginia at Lansdowne.

"We feel that everything we do is incredibly important," Dr. Todd says. "Our goal is that when patients leave the office, they will say the following: 'This is the best experience I've ever had in a medical office,' or some kind of global compliment (that applies) to everybody." He says the comments they receive are written down in a special book, and adds with smile, "You know, in medicine they say, 'If you didn't chart it, it didn't happen.'"

When the tally of these kinds of comments reaches 10, the office buys lunch for the staff. "That's the most rewarding part of our job," Dr. Todd notes, "when we can eat lunch and read the comments out loud."

At some point, it's a sure bet they've read comments from Gruff Herrman. Herrman is what you'd call an outdoors kind of guy - he lived out in New Mexico for 10 years managing a dude ranch, and has also worked as a police officer, a blacksmith and a ranch hand. "I was out in the sun all day," Hermann says. He now manages farms for folks in and around Middleburg.

Referred by a dermatologist in Warrenton, Herrman visited Dr. Todd twice in 2009, once for a basal cell carcinoma on his face, and second time for a similar spot on his neck. He was quite satisfied with the results. "It was unbelievable. The second time, to tell the truth, I was kind of looking forward to it," Herrman says. "We need more doctors like Dr. Todd. When you have somebody who gives you that kind of service, it makes you feel good and gives you hope. It was probably the best doctor experience I've ever had."

That's the type of comment Dr. Todd and his staff aim for - one for the books.