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The art of medicine

A passion for detail defines Jim Lowe as a plastic and reconstructive surgeon

By Kim Leydig

James B. Lowe III, M.D., chief of the Section of Cosmetic Surgery, admits he's obsessed with detail. "When I'm in the operating room, every millimeter and every second counts," he says. "It's so important to be 100 percent focused in the OR. I go into this zone and nothing can distract me."

With every procedure — whether it's extensive facial plastic surgery, Botox injections or traumatic hand reconstruction — the field of plastic and reconstructive surgery offers Lowe an amazing artistic opportunity to rejuvenate patients and make a profound difference in their lives.

"Plastic and reconstructive surgery is an art," Lowe explains. "My goal is to achieve a harmonious balance between form and function. It offers me a chance to drastically improve my patients' lives by using my artistic abilities and creative problem-solving skills."

For the past three years, Jennifer Smith has been coming to Lowe for minor cosmetic procedures, so when she decided to undergo more extensive plastic



Courtesy Photo

(From left) James B. Lowe III, M.D., and medical assistant Tammie Newhouse consult with patient Doris Raines about cosmetic procedures at Lowe's clinic in the Center for Advanced Medicine. "My philosophy is simple: Cosmetic surgery is creative problem solving," he says. "I analyze all the options, explain the risks involved and then strive for the optimal aesthetic result. With every procedure, I have the chance to dramatically improve my patients' lives ? and that's incredibly rewarding."

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Washington People

James B. Lowe III

is defined by his keen eye for detail

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surgery she knew she was in great hands.

"Dr. Lowe is so talented — he aims for perfection," says Smith, who thoroughly researched the region's top plastic surgeons via news stories, medical journals and online patient experiences before choosing a doctor.

"Deciding to have major plastic surgery can be a daunting decision, but Dr. Lowe is so incredibly skilled, I felt completely safe and confident that my results would be amazing. I can't even begin to count how many of my friends I've recommended him to. He is one of the best plastic surgeons in the nation."

Lowe admits it's impossible to achieve perfection, but his colleagues say that'll never stop him from striving for it.

"Jim has a very keen eye for aesthetic detail and is a perfectionist," says Keith E. Brandt, M.D., associate professor of surgery. "These two aspects are a perfect match for an aesthetic surgeon. Jim sets very high standards for himself and his practice, which benefits both his patients and the residents who train with him."

Lowe explains that his primary goal with all his patients is to provide excellent clinical results along with a high level of patient care and service.

"Jim has a tremendous passion for providing the best care for his patients," says Susan E. Mackinnon, M.D., the Sydney M. Jr. and Robert H. Shoenberg Professor of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery and head of the division. "He is sensitive to their needs and works with the individual to achieve the best outcome. He provides the same level of care for people who suffer massive trauma as well as those who seek improvement through cosmetics.

"He is rapidly becoming one of the top plastic surgeons in the nation — he's a gifted surgical technician with an artistic eye."

Faces of beauty

As director of the University's Cosmetic Surgery Center, Lowe develops innovative mid-face surgical techniques and leads groundbreaking research on facial plastic surgery.

Repeatedly sought by the national media for his expertise in facial plastic surgery, Lowe, also an assistant professor of surgery, explains that what draws him to academic medicine is the opportunity to leave his "footprint on the field" by developing innovative techniques and leading groundbreaking research.

Lowe and his team are among only a handful of scientists worldwide studying how to preserve ethnicity in plastic surgery.

By measuring and studying the positions of facial features — lips, brows, cheek bones, noses — in African-Americans, Middle Easterners, Hispanics and Native Americans, along with a breakdown of Asian subcultures, Lowe aims to define "a standard of beauty" for major ethnic groups.

"Today, beauty transcends race and color and is truly dependent on the harmonious relationship of a person's facial features," he says. "Our goal is to probe the depths of what is aesthetically pleasing for each group."

A recent study by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery reveals that cosmetic and reconstructive surgery increased exponentially among minorities from 1999-2001 — more than quadrupling among Asian-Americans and African-Americans and tripling among Hispanics.

As the number of ethnic patients seeking plastic surgery continues to rise, understanding how to preserve ethnicity is critical to creating an attractive and natural look.

"Caucasian beauty is pretty well-defined in our culture, so we know what's acceptable," Lowe says. "We also ought to know what's acceptable for other ethnic groups. What's attractive for Caucasians isn't necessarily beautiful for everyone."

For the past three years, Lowe and his team have been researching aesthetic attractiveness for different ethnic groups. By measuring the position of facial features, such as the lips, brow lines, cheekbones and noses, of people from different ethnic groups ages 18-65, the researchers are determining attractive facial features for each group.

Lowe's study includes African-Americans, Middle Easterners, Hispanics and Native Americans along with a breakdown of Asian subcultures into Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and Hawaiian.

"The goal of plastic surgeons should be to enhance or rejuvenate the patient's natural features," Lowe says. "But we can't make someone look 'natural' if we don't know what 'natural' is for them. Our goal is to really get to the depths of what is aesthetically acceptable and beautiful for each group."

For the study, Lowe and his team are also analyzing and taking measurements of ethnic models in magazines to further define the aesthetic for major ethnic groups.

"Patients want to look their best, but within their own ethnic group," Lowe says. "The goal is to achieve a natural look that brings individual facial features into a



Courtesy Photo

Lowe with his wife, Julie, M.D., who finished a dermatology residency at the School of Medicine and Barnes-Jewish Hospital in July. The couple has two sons.

harmonious balance while maintaining ethnic traits."

The extensive study helps Lowe treat patients like Lucille Harris, a 60-year-old African-American elementary school teacher who came to Lowe because she wanted to rejuvenate her face.

"I felt like I was 25 inside, but I looked 60 on the outside," she says. "I wanted to look as good as I feel."

Harris had been considering having a face- and brow-lift for years, but she was afraid of the pain and concerned about the cost. In the early '90s, Lucille Harris' mother elected to have a face-lift at the School of Medicine and became one of the first older African-American women to have facial plastic surgery in the region.

Her mother was so ecstatic with the results that she encouraged Lucille to have plastic surgery. "This was something I really wanted to do for myself," she says. "And I'm thrilled with the outcome, now I look as great as I feel."

Patients like Harris and Smith explain that another reason they hold Lowe in such high regard is that he stresses plastic surgery is something you want — not something you need.

"If I had to sum up his bedside manner in one word, it would be honest," Smith says. "He's very honest about what a procedure will and won't do. He wants patients to have realistic expectations, and he wants to ensure they're having the procedure for the right reason.

"A face lift isn't going to save a failing marriage or get you a raise, but it can improve your appearance and self-confidence. And thanks to Dr. Lowe, I smile a lot more when I look in the mirror."

On the cutting edge

While Lowe's research and clinical practice focuses on face and mid-face rejuvenating procedures, he also specializes in hand and wrist reconstructive surgery, liposuction, tissue fillers and breast augmentation.

Lowe's expertise is backed by two residencies — one in general surgery from the University of Texas Health Science Center and one in plastic reconstructive surgery from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

James B. Lowe III

University titles: Chief of the Section of Cosmetic Surgery and assistant professor of surgery

Family: Wife, Julie, M.D., who recently finished a dermatology residency at the School of Medicine; and two sons

Hometown: Oklahoma City, Okla.

Recent awards: National Plastic Surgery Education Foundation 2002 Basic Science Essay Award and the 1999 Clinical Essay Award; The Paul Weeks Resident Teaching Award, Washington University, 2003; Resident Research Award, University of Texas Southwestern, 1999

Alternative occupation: Sculptor or carpenter

He then went onto complete a hand, nerve and microsurgical fellowship at Washington University and joined the School of Medicine faculty in 2000. He also earned an M.B.A. in health sciences management at the Olin School of Business in 2002.

Lowe is also board-certified by the American Board of Surgery and the American Board of Plastic Surgery.

"Jim's skills are exemplary as he develops advanced techniques," Mackinnon says. "He's a dynamic asset to the University and an excellent academician. He has been the driving force in creating an outstanding cosmetic surgery section at the University."

Lowe and his team also publish New Horizons, an educational newsletter — featured on drjlowe.com — that informs patients about exciting developments in plastic and reconstructive surgery and provides patients cutting-edge information on the latest procedures.

"My philosophy is simple: Cosmetic surgery is creative problem solving," Lowe says. "I analyze all the options, explain the risks involved and then strive for the optimal aesthetic result.

"With every procedure, I have the chance to dramatically improve my patients' lives — and that's incredibly rewarding."

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