

# MedEsthetics®

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to Reduce  
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**Karol Gutowski, MD**  
On Making the Move from Academia to Private Practice

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# Do The RIGHT THING

Karol Gutowski, MD, combines his passion for research, education, patient care and lifelong learning in his plastic surgery practice.

*By Keith Loria*

*Photography By Kat Schleicher*

**Karol Gutowski, MD, found plastic surgery** by way of organ transplantation. As a pre-med student at the University of Michigan, his early research projects were in transplantation surgery, and he became a member of the University's organ transplant team, focusing on perfusion—preserving the organ for transplantation. “That got me all excited about surgery. I thought I wanted to be a transplant surgeon and do liver and kidney transplants,” he says. “After completing medical school, I matched in a general surgery residency at the University of Minnesota, one of the top transplant centers in the world.”





Dr. Gutowski is a co-developer of the ASPS' TOPS database. His passion for research and patient safety is at the core of his practice culture.

In his first month there, he was assigned to cover general surgery, trauma and plastic surgery patients. "I helped the plastic surgeons re-attach amputated fingers, do complex facial surgeries and operate all over the body. This was more fascinating and challenging than general surgery. I actually became more interested in plastic surgery," he says.

During this time, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration placed a hold on using silicone breast implants for aesthetic procedures as word of potential complications dominated the news. Dr. Gutowski spent two years during residency conducting research on alternative implants. His work resulted in publication of two of the largest clinical studies confirming the safety of saline breast implants, which helped him secure a spot in UT Southwestern's plastic surgery training program.

Today, the plastic and reconstructive surgeon's resume includes stints as chief of plastic surgery, residency program director and co-developer of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons TOPS (Tracking Operations and Outcomes for Plastic Surgeons) database. In 2015, he founded his current plastic surgery practice with locations in Chicago, Oakbrook and Glenview, Illinois.

"My [philosophy] is to keep learning, force yourself to contribute, and give back to the specialty because that will make you better," says Dr. Gutowski.

### **Commitment To Academia**

After completing his training, Dr. Gutowski accepted a position as assistant professor of plastic surgery at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he found himself immersed in multiple roles. "There was a new chief of plastic surgery and he recruited me as his first hire," says Dr. Gutowski. "I was appointed chief of plastic surgery at the William S. Middleton VA Hospital. I also became the residency program director, responsible for training plastic surgery residents. During the same time, I started building an aesthetic surgery program at the school as well."

While working at the University, he became involved with the American Society of Plastic Surgeons serving on multiple committees focusing on patient outcomes, safety, clinical research and education. This period in his career was especially fulfilling. "Teaching residents to become excellent plastic surgeons gave me a real sense of purpose, and it was rewarding to see how successful they became," he says. "Through my work at ASPS—particularly developing the TOPS database—we were able to provide new tools to measure outcomes and improve patient care."

After eight years at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Dr. Gutowski was recruited to a chief of plastic surgery position at a large, nonacademic healthcare system in Chicago. The administrators of the system wanted to



Like many plastic surgeons, Dr. Gutowski has seen immense demand for less invasive treatments with shorter downtimes.

create a plastic surgery program similar to what he helped build at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. But he found the setting was not right for him.

"It was the exact opposite of what I wanted my practice to be," he says. "I felt like I had a choke collar and muzzle on me the whole time. I left after two years so that I could build the kind of private practice that I felt my patients deserved."

### **Bringing a Vision to Life**

His goal was to create a concierge aesthetic plastic surgery practice and medical spa. Stepping into the role of practice owner was scary, he admits, but also invigorating. "I already knew what needed to be done, and I didn't have to ask for permission or run it by somebody first," he says.

He brought on a practice manager and patient care consultant to help him manage the practice, "Hiring Ellen, who has an MBA from the University of Chicago and is very business-oriented, was a key moment," he says. "She had knowledge about plastic surgery and previously worked as a medspa consultant helping other businesses become successful. Once she and I started working together, the practice really took off."

Their newest office in Glenview, Illinois, is a former day spa that now serves as the practice's flagship location. "We

demolished over 2,000 square feet, incorporating some of the original wood accents, to make it more airy and contemporary," says Dr. Gutowski. "I wanted a very clean and uncluttered appearance that would also feel welcoming to our patients."

The building is next to a park with a small lake that patients pass to enter the office. From the reception area, one hallway leads to the plastic surgery clinic and another to the medspa. The facility also features a surgery suite that includes a minor procedure room, an accredited operating room, nurse's station and recovery area.

"Each part of the office has a different look and feel and serves a different purpose," says Dr. Gutowski. "The surgery suite obviously looks more traditional, similar to a high-tech hospital. On the clinic side, we have some rooms dedicated for research and educational conferences. The medspa is warm and inviting with soothing colors, soft lights and relaxing music."

### **The Four "R"s**

When Dr. Gutowski began his training, Botox had just been approved and hyaluronic acid fillers were not yet available. Today, such noninvasive and minimally invasive treatments account for a large portion of his practice. While he still



Dr. Gutowski wanted to create an airy and welcoming environment for patients.

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performs facelifts, most of his patients prefer shorter downtimes for facial concerns, so he focuses on what he calls "the Four 'R's.'"

"I relax the muscle with neuromodulators—Botox, Dysport or Xeomin. If needed, I refill the face to correct the lost volume with fillers. In many patients, I resurface the skin with lasers, chemical peels or IPL treatments. Then I re-lift the soft tissue with minimally invasive procedures such as radiofrequency treatments or laser liposuction in the neck," he says. "Over the last few years, this portion of my practice has grown because people would rather come in and get things done a few times over the years than all at once and have a prolonged recovery."

But things are different when it comes to the body. Today, Dr. Gutowski does much more aggressive liposuction and body contouring than in the past. "For the body, I do bigger procedures to get better results. For example, I do a no-drain, 360-degree liposuction and tummy tuck where I contour the body all the way around the trunk and then do a no-drain tummy tuck at the same time," he says. "In many cases, I 'repurpose' the removed fat by using it to enhance the breasts or buttocks."

Laser and energy devices have also evolved since he launched his practice. "We have four CoolSculpting machines, which bring in a lot of patients," Dr. Gutowski says. "I've tried it myself so I know what it can do. While it does provide nice results, some people are better off with liposuction and a tummy tuck. Since I offer all these treatments, I can offer them the whole range of body reshaping options."

Dr. Gutowski also specializes in treating lipedema, a metabolic disorder that results in fat overgrowth in the legs. Many of his lipedema patients travel long distances for a series of liposuction treatments to regain better function and quality of life.

Even with a successful and growing practice, Dr. Gutowski still sees himself as an academic plastic surgeon. He enjoys teaching students and residents as a clinical associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and he continues to publish scientific papers and lecture nationally on new topics in aesthetic surgery and nonsurgical treatments.

"When I prepare to give a lecture, teach a course or write a paper for publication, I become much better at that topic," he says.

"If you want to teach something, you have to become an expert on it. So it forces me to keep learning."

His passion for academia and research is built into his practice. "My newest project is setting up a research institute in our Glenview flagship location," he says. "We just hired a talented physician's assistant who has research and education experience with lasers and radiofrequency technology. As we develop our practice as a teaching facility for injectable procedures and aesthetic laser treatments, we are also setting up a research side to go from 'bench to bedside,' so we can offer our patients the newest, most effective treatments."

His son is currently in college and is interested in becoming a doctor, and Dr. Gutowski looks forward to having the opportunity to mentor him—as he has so many others—as he pursues a career in medicine.

"What I've come to realize is that to be successful, you need to put your patients first," says Dr. Gutowski. "It can't be about the dollar. It has to be about doing the right thing for our patients." ME

**Keith Loria** is a freelance writer based in Oaktown, VA.