



Dr. Srdan Babovic and surgical team members Tracy Moons, Diane Sackett, and Jennifer Klimek operate on a hand.

The cutting crew

STORY BY STEVE LANGE
PHOTOS BY JODI O'SHAUGHNESSY OLSON

Maybe the “biggest, best-kept secret in town,” Dr. Srdan Babovic and Olmsted Medical Center's Plastic Surgery Department treat 100 patients per week, most of whom slip in through OMC's back entrance.

A dozen or so times per week, from inside an Olmsted Medical Center operating room filled with the sounds of everything from Aerosmith to Shakira, Dr. Srđan Babovic reshapes your neighbor's chin, or gives your mailman tighter buttocks, or turns your co-worker's breasts from an A or DD cup to a C.

That doesn't include the 60 or so office-based procedures—Botox and Restylane injections, mole removal—that Babovic, 48, performs on a weekly basis.

"Here's my schedule for today," says Babovic, sitting in his small office and reading from a clipboarded list. "I did a Botox, talked with a lady about fat injections for her face, talked to a lady about breast implants I did two weeks ago. I saw a lady about a breast reduction, removed some moles, then this interview with you. Next it's Botox for hyperhidrosis—which is somebody who sweats a lot, and I will give her Botox in the armpits so she will sweat less. I need to do some eyelids and a browlift. That's one page out of four."

It wasn't always like this for the Serbian-born Babovic, who, along with his wife, Dusica, and their three small children, secretly fled Sarajevo in 1992 during the height of the Bosnian War. "I saw many of the war wounded," says Babovic. "I had to bandage burns. I had to amputate arms." The Babovics escaped to the United States, where Srđan had a Fulbright research fellowship waiting for him at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University.

Though he had previously received his medical degree in Yugoslavia, Babovic needed U.S. medical certification, and moved to Rochester in 1995 for a residency at Mayo Clinic.

Then Olmsted Medical Center, in search of its first—and still only—plastic surgeon, came calling.

"We started in 2001 with one secretary, one nurse and me," Babovic says. "Now it's two secretaries, three nurses, me and one business office manager. And we're busy. I would like this place to be bigger and have a partner at some time, and that will probably happen in a few years."

"Just four years ago someone might call in the morning and we'd say 'Sure,

come in this afternoon,'" says Judy Brandt, Babovic's patient services representative since 2002. "Now the regulars call and I have to tell them we're booked for the next month."

Today, 100 patients per week—for everything from consultations (\$122) to tummy tucks (10 per month)—slip in through the OMC Department of Plastic Surgery's back door, the blue-awned west entrance used by 90 percent of Babovic's patients.

It is, after all, Minnesota—geographically and (many would say) philosophically one of the farthest spots from the trends of L.A. and New York.

"It is more conservative here," Babovic says. "It does seem to take a few years for the national trends to get here."

Minnesotans are just now drinking Mojitos. We're just now wearing crop pants with boots. Many Midwestern patients, according to anecdotal research from local plastic surgeons, all but apologize for the narcissistic sin some feel they are about to commit.

"When I see patients on the street I usually pretend not to recognize them, because many of them want it that way," says Babovic. "But it is getting where more people will come up to me. It is getting where more people talk openly about it, even in Rochester."

Still, he says, "We're the biggest, best-kept secret in town. We sneak in, they sneak in. For the people that want it secret, we keep it secret."

The rise in non-invasive procedures—especially the wrinkle treatments Botox and Restylane—have allowed patients to get cosmetic care without the telltale bandages or downtime. The year 2005, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, was the first year in the past six that facelifts did not rate in the top five cosmetic surgical procedures.

"The biggest trend is in non-operative rejuvenation," says Babovic. "It's easier to decide to do a little Botox or Restylane injection to look better for a while, and that's why you're seeing fewer facelifts. But if a 65-year-old lady comes in who is sagging all over



Photos by Ken Klotzbach

"That's why they call it a practice, because you practice it every day."

“The most beautiful question is ‘Why?’ and I ask myself that every day.”



there is no Restylane that is going to fix it. You have to do a facelift.

“Botox is boom boom boom,” he says, motioning his finger like a syringe at his face. “Three shots and you walk away and no one knows I’ve touched you. It is hard for someone to take three weeks downtime for a facelift.”

A Botox treatment, according to Babovic, will last three to five months and costs roughly \$500; Restylane averages six to nine months and an average treatment is \$500. “The results may seem minimal the first time, but if you do a little five times it starts to look very good.”

Babovic avoids the “Botox parties” popularized on celeb surgeon shows like “Dr. 90210.” “You don’t mix business with pleasure, that’s not a good mix,” he says. “I don’t hear of a lot of those, here. Rochester is pretty conservative.”

Despite the rising social acceptance of cosmetic procedures, Babovic believes that most patients not only realize the physical risks, but have also pondered the philosophical side of plastic surgery.

“Most of the people I see are everyday people on the street,” he says. “Retail clerks,

truck drivers, moms, whatever. It’s not the rich people only who come in. You’d be surprised who it is.

“Whatever they want changed bothers them enough that they are willing to accept the pain and expense,” he says. “And there are many checkpoints before they get to surgery. They have to call and set up an appointment. They have to come in and take their clothes off, sometimes, and get their pictures taken. They have to sit and talk about it.

“If somebody feels they have small breasts we can make bigger ones. If they feel they are too big we can make smaller ones. It’s probably not even that different of a philosophy with any of the procedures—they all want to look more appealing to themselves.

“Does a man without a nose feel normal? Probably not. Probably gets stares. Does a woman with an ‘A’-cup breast look normal? To me she does, to you she does, but she might not feel that way. It’s more borderline, but it’s all the same reason—to look better to yourself.

“The beauty of what a plastic surgeon has that other surgeons don’t have as much is

the ability to say ‘no.’ I can say I can’t do what you want or I don’t have what you’re looking for. The problem, sometimes, is that people want you to change them inside.”

It’s not all wrinkle reduction and liposuction, though. Just two-thirds of Babovic’s work is cosmetic; the other one-third is reconstructive surgery.

“Once a week I get called in for an emergency,” he says. “The big emergencies go to St. Marys or Methodist. But I get called in for dog bites or hockey players getting their face hurt. But it’s not a big deal. I come in and stitch them up.”

A few weeks ago, Babovic made a nose where cancer had cut a hole in Jim Kuhn’s face. “It was a total nose reconstruction,” Babovic says. He created the inside lining of the nose with skin from Kuhn’s cheek, used cartilage removed from Kuhn’s ears to shape the nose, covered it with a flap of skin from Kuhn’s forehead. Replaced the cartilage in the ears with titanium mesh; replaced the skin on the forehead with a skin graf from underneath Kuhn’s arm.

“I got cancer in the nose area close to two years ago,” says Kuhn, a 79-year-old former

orange juice distributor and part-time pilot from Stewartville. "It was basically a tumor they removed at Mayo Clinic. I was left with a hole in my face. It did bother me a bit, the looks I got. Mostly it would be kids staring at you, saying 'What, have you got a hole in your head?'"

"Finally I went down to OMC and the gal said 'Can I help you?' and I said 'I want this taken care of' and I pointed to my face. Dr. Babovic was very straightforward and laid it all out for me. They've got some nice people there."

"The nose is just about complete now, and it looks like I hoped it would. You don't think it'd matter at this age, but it gave me back my self-esteem."

Babovic singles out Kuhn's case as the kind that makes his job worthwhile. "Mr. Kuhn's case is what it's all about," Babovic says. "It shows how important our team is. He came in and was treated well by everyone he met here. Everyone here is on this team for a reason, and it's because they all care about the people who come in, whether it's removing a mole or making a nose. It's not like what God can make, but now he has a nose on his face and he can put his glasses on. It's one of those cases that makes you feel good about yourself."

"Everything a human does is basically designed to make life better one way or another," says Babovic. "I have the shortest trip to reaching that satisfaction. I can do a two-hour surgery and someone can open their eyes and see themselves with a new face or a new nose. Think about how good that makes you feel."



DR. SRDAN BABOVIC, PLASTIC SURGEON AT OLMSTED MEDICAL CENTER

FAMILY: Dr. Babovic and his wife Dusica have three children: daughter, Jovana, 25; and sons Nikola, 20, and Mihajlo, 18. All three kids attended (or attend) Mayo High School.

WHAT HE'S LEARNED ABOUT MATURE WOMEN: "It's been a discovery how much pain a mature woman can take compared to a mature man. Especially if she's been through the birth procedure."

TWO RANDOM QUOTES THAT WE COULDN'T FIT INTO THE STORY: "That's why they call it a practice, because you practice it every day."

"The most beautiful question is 'Why?' and I ask myself that every day."

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