

The art of being an oculoplastic surgeon

Elizabeth Emsley¹

Elizabeth talks to Sabrina Shah-Desai, a consultant oculoplastic surgeon about her career and relocating from India to the United Kingdom.

Why did you choose ophthalmology?

There is an old adage “the eyes are the window to the soul”; I was fascinated by the fact that eyes offer a unique view into the body, allowing one to diagnose many systemic diseases. They are the only structure where you can examine a naked nerve and blood vessel without performing surgery. I chose ophthalmology, as it is an innovative branch of medicine, which I can practice as both a physician and surgeon. As a mother (and a competitive woman), it gives me the satisfaction of career progression, whilst achieving a good work-life balance, with an option of choosing to work in a hospital environment or in private practice.

What interested you in oculoplastics?

As an aesthetic person I enjoy the art, science and imagination that this specialty demands. Oculoplastics allows me to apply the micro precision of ophthalmology to the aesthetic concepts of facial plastic surgery.

You trained in India, what attracted you to work in the UK? Do you still work in India?

Whilst training in India, I had only one ambition – to work with the legendary Richard Collin in oculoplastics! As he was based at Moorfields Eye Hospital, UK seemed the natural destination. I don't work in India at present, but do want to get involved with charitable groups to restore/rehabilitate patients with peri-ocular deformities in India.

You have done three fellowships can you elaborate on these?

Well, my first port of call was East Grinstead ('96-'97)– the Corneal & Oculoplastic fellowship was a steep learning curve, with an intensive pace and wide exposure to ocular surface disease, burns and trauma. My second fellowship at Southampton & Salisbury ('98) was shorter and more relaxed, with 1-1 training that consolidated my concepts. My third fellowship at Moorfields (2000), with Richard Collin & Geoff Rose, gave me confidence and invaluable skills to tackle complex conditions and strengthened my desire to pursue this subspecialty as a career. I did undertake one more fellowship – at Chelsea Westminster in 2009,

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BIOGRAPHY

Sabrina Shah-Desai is a Consultant Ophthalmic and Plastic Reconstructive Surgeon based at BHR University Hospitals NHS Trust, where she heads the division of Oculoplastic surgery. She offers a comprehensive eyelid and lacrimal service for children & adults. She also performs cosmetic eyelid surgery and peri-ocular rejuvenation with botox & fillers.

After completing her undergraduate medical studies and postgraduate Ophthalmology training in Bombay, she has undertaken three subspecialty fellowships in the UK, as well as a fellowship secondment. Mrs. Shah-Desai has contributed to many publications in medical journals, has written textbook chapters and particularly enjoys teaching budding oculoplastic surgeons.

where I learnt more advanced facial aesthetic techniques. All my fellowships contributed in developing unique insights into the practice of this sub specialty. They also opened doors to an elite club of distinguished professional colleagues, who have become mentors & friends over the years.

Do you have advice for any budding oculoplastic surgeons?

Choose your fellowships carefully – I recommend finding teachers who willingly nurture and support your career, talk to other trainees for advice. Plan to undertake at least 2 fellowships, one basic and one advanced. Build your support network with colleagues and in complementary specialties (plastic, maxillofacial, ENT and dermatology) both nationally & internationally, which will help maintain your world perspective. Finally have the courage to innovate and follow your own interests.

How do you see the future of oculoplastics?

There is a feeling amongst CCG's, supported by some ophthalmologists, that oculoplastic procedures are primarily cosmetic, thus trivializing the visual & functional impact of common eyelid, lacrimal and orbital conditions. This attitude poses a significant challenge to the future of this subspecialty in difficult financial times with NHS cut backs. However, cosmetic surgery continues to defy global recession, the booming market offering opportunities to oculoplastic surgeons to expand their repertoire and offer various facial rejuvenating procedures, traditionally the domain of dermatologists and plastic surgeons.

What has been the most memorable moment of your career?

For sentimental reasons it was when I operated alongside my dad, who was a brilliant surgeon, with exacting surgical standards. I harvested my first split skin graft and performed a complex socket reconstruction fresh out of my fellowships. I still remember the look of respect mixed with paternal pride in his eyes – it was very special.

Other than ophthalmology, what else interests you?

I could happily combine my passions of cooking, eating, travelling art and culture, to become a food critic & travel writer – perhaps in another life. ■