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Zein Obagi, MD
Shares his path from emigre
to eminence in dermatology

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SITTING IN HIS MODERN, sundrenched office at the Obagi Skin Health Institute—an 8,000-square-foot, fully-equipped dermatology practice in the heart of Beverly Hills, California—Zein Obagi, MD, seems a lifetime away from his days as a struggling medical intern, who fled Syria for Detroit in the early 1970s in search of better opportunities. That’s where Dr. Obagi’s medical story begins, and it is a remarkable one.

Today, Dr. Obagi helms a dermatology empire that encompasses three facilities in Southern California; two skincare lines, ZO Skin Health and ZO Medical; several educational seminars and courses, and a soon-to-be-released book on skin health.

To understand how he got here, we first have to travel back to 1960s Syria, where a teenage Zein Obagi was exposed to what he calls “certain disasters” that propelled him towards a career in medicine.

Beyond the Surface

Zein Obagi, MD, has built his career on advancing the field of dermatology through personalized care and product development.

By Stacy Gueraseva

Photography by Cory Sorensen

The first involved his grandfather, a Cossak who left Russia in the 1920s, settling in Syria. Fair-skinned, blond and blue-eyed, he suffered from chronic skin cancer. “They cut so many skin cancers, his face eventually deformed,” says Dr. Obagi. “And that scared me so much. I said, ‘How can you not prevent this?’”

The next disaster occurred when Dr. Obagi’s older sister received second- and third-degree burns—resulting in bad scarring—when a pan of boiling water fell on her back. The treatment involved keeping her immobile on her stomach for four months. “I saw the frustration on the doctors’ faces in treating her, and I said, ‘Maybe I could be of better help or I could contribute positively to medicine,’” Dr. Obagi recalls. “So I made up my mind: I want to be a doctor.”



The Obagi brand has become one of the most recognizable names in dermatology and skin care.

He didn’t waste any time, and entered Damascus Medical School immediately after high school, graduating in 1972. The same year, eager to escape prejudice against Russian refugees in Syria and continue his medical education, Dr. Obagi moved to Detroit. He did his internship, but was unable to secure a residency in dermatology. Instead, he went into pathology, which satisfied his natural inquisitiveness, but ultimately proved too narrowly focused. “I’m a clinical guy, I like to talk to people,” says Dr. Obagi. “I don’t like to sit behind a microscope and just do biopsies and autopsies.”

He completed a dermatology residency while serving as a medical doctor in the U.S. Navy, stationed in Hawaii, then spent three years as a dermatologist at the naval hospital in San Diego

before opening his first practice in Chula Vista, California.

At the time, the field of aesthetic medicine was a vastly different landscape, and it began to frustrate him. “The practice of dermatology was really very limited,” Dr. Obagi recalls. “It focused on the skin surface. It focused on treating symptoms—not on searching and correcting the source of the problem.”

He wanted to get to that source, to understand why the same treatment did not work alike on African-American skin, Caucasian skin and Latino skin, for example. The prior decade had laid a unique foundation for his new quest. Pathology had given him a keen understanding of the “functionality of the body,” he says. His time in the naval hospital, where he treated numerous scars and wounds, solidified his love of dermatology and crystallized what had been lacking in his work. “I wanted to do research. I wanted to figure out why skin cancer happens, how to prevent skin cancer, how do we treat scars,” he says. “The Navy didn’t feel that this was really the thing they wanted to spend budget money on, so I left,” he says.

And so, behind of the walls of his newly opened practice in Chula Vista, he embarked on a two-year period of being an aesthetic detective. “I started searching, looking, and then I found out that the first thing that’s missing is that we don’t have a proper approach to evaluate skin,” he recalls. He set a goal for himself: “There’s something wrong with what we know; I have to improve it.” This pursuit of a deeper understanding of skin would ultimately shift him from just another dermatologist to a leader in the field.

Reaching the Cellular Level

The nucleus of Dr. Obagi’s approach to skincare is the idea that prevention, rejuvenation and treatment should begin at the cellular level, not on the surface, and that different skin types react differently to treatment. Therefore, each patient requires an individual consultation and



treatment plan. “I started to see that dermatology, as it exists today, is inadequate,” says Dr. Obagi of his years at the Chula Vista practice. “I cannot accept when someone says, ‘There is no treatment for this.’ If there is a problem, there should be a treatment.

“I used to ask myself: OK, if I have 10 conditions, the same conditions on 10 people—some black, some white, some Latinos—and I’m giving them the same thing, how come some improve, some don’t improve, some improve more, some improve less. Why?”

It soon occurred to him that the different responses related to the patients’ individual skin types. “I noticed that people with oily skin respond slower to treatment than people with dry skin,” says Dr. Obagi. “People with thin skin respond faster to treatment than people with thick skin. So that brought the idea to my mind that I need a skin classification system to orient the treatment, and to really think of the skin as a living organ that should be addressed from different angles.”

Shifting the focus from the surface to the cellular level changed his approach to treatment. He now had a new series of steps: “We start by creating a skin classification to help me adjust treatment based on skin type,” he says. “Then I create a treatment protocol that allows me to go to the cells. And that required creating products that are able to penetrate.”

The result was the tretinoin-based Nu-Derm system, Dr Obagi’s first commercially available skincare product, which launched in 1985. Thanks to his new approach, he was able to offer much more effective results, “especially in the most difficult problem many women complain of: pigmentation,” he says.

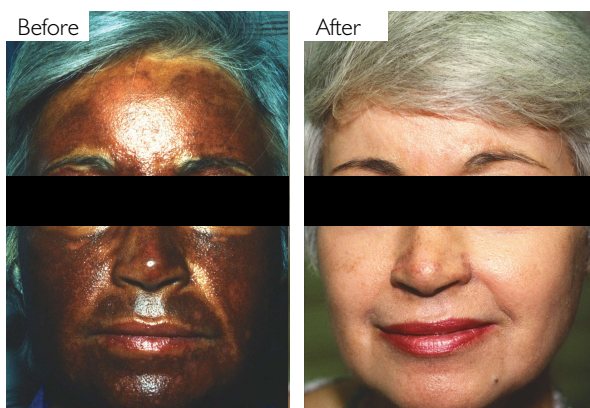
A Focus on Skin Health

One such case involved a patient whose skin literally turned black after a botched chemical peel. The patient—a Caucasian female—was a real estate agent, whose life came to a halt after the incident. The case garnered national publicity. “Dad, I hope she can come to you,” remarked Dr. Obagi’s daughter when she saw the woman on TV. Six months later, the patient did indeed connect with Dr. Obagi, and after six months of treatment, he was able to restore her skin fully.

That success story created a buzz around Dr. Obagi. Suddenly, he began to receive pigmentation problems from all over the world. But since his specialty was not just in pigmentation, he wanted to differentiate his approach and put a name on it: Skin Health Restoration.

Dr. Obagi changed course from pathology to dermatology because “I like to talk to people,” he says.

“I will not do what my patient wants. I will do what is best for my patient.”



Dr. Obagi's successful treatment of this patient, who suffered severe PIH following a chemical peel, gained him a global reputation for the treatment of pigmentation concerns.

"[In dermatology] we were disease-oriented, not health-oriented," he says. Skin health restoration, as Dr. Obagi defined it, meant returning skin to a natural, healthy state, where it is "smooth and tight with collagen and elastin; even in color, when all the cells are working properly; hydrated, natural and strong," Dr. Obagi explains. Armed with his newly coined term, he set about creating a more comprehensive analysis of his patients' skin. "So that when I treat you—let's say, the patient has acne, skin is sensitive, or oily, pores are large—I don't focus only on treating the acne, I want to correct all the other elements at the same time. And that's how I make your skin healthy."

The Circle of Care

He next entered the arena of the TCA peel, which was in its infancy at the time and "had no systemic absorption," he says. "A doctor would take the acid, paint it on and say in his heart, 'I hope she will be alright.'" Dr. Obagi began to experiment with the concentration and formulation of TCA peels. He developed the TCA-based Blue Peel and was one of the first dermatologists to attempt peeling dark skin types—something that was unheard of at the time—with successful results.

By the late 1980s, the Nu-Derm System and Blue Peels were growing in reputation. "Everybody thought it was magic," he recalls. "So when doctors saw my results, they flocked in to try to learn." He formed a small company to distribute the product. Ten years later, a bigger company bought Nu-Derm and went public, at which point Dr. Obagi and the company decided to part ways.

"A doctor would take the acid, paint it on and say in his heart, 'I hope she will be alright.'"

"By 1987-89, when my name was all over the country, all over the world, at that time I entered through a war," he recalls. "The war was that I'm changing the concept of dermatology practice, and there are people who have narrow vision and big egos—'who is he to change this, we don't want to believe him.' They ganged up on me." But he stuck to his vision and within six years, the industry came around. "It's like when Galileo tried to tell people the earth is round, and everyone thought it was flat," he says.

In 2007, he introduced ZO Skin Health—a non-medical line for daily skin care. The line's key differentiating point has been that it offers a higher concentration of retinol than what is commonly found in over-the-counter department store lines. "That represents the circle of skincare," he says. "Everybody—from childhood to the day we die—we have to be in that circle, taking care of our skin, as we eat, as we breathe, as we do everything to look our best."

A Family Legacy

Dr. Obagi's success has inspired his children as well. Suzan Obagi, MD, is a dermatologist and cosmetic surgeon. Daughter Sandra is a licensed esthetician, and Dr. Obagi has a son who is currently studying pre-med in Boston and a 21-year-old daughter who is eyeing a future in medicine.

But his biggest champion has been his wife, Samar, who for 20 years has been handling the business side of the Obagi Skin Health Centers, including practice management, travel and employee training. "She takes the whole headache off my back," says Dr. Obagi. "I only do what I do: I do my research, I do my work, I do my formulation, I see my patients, I train doctors." He points out that it's not often that a husband and wife can work together successfully, but in their case, it was the opposite. "Luckily, I have the most



wonderful wife in the world,” he says. “From day one, she has been with me.” Together, they’ve grown the practice and expanded the Obagi brand, without any of the successes or obstacles affecting their marriage. And that is among his proudest achievements.

Dr. Obagi also benefited from two key figures in dermatology, both of whom prepared him to “fight those people who have tunnel vision,” he says. The first was Dr. Sam Stegman in San Francisco. “When he saw me doing peels, he really helped me in solving certain puzzles,” says Dr. Obagi. The other mentor was Dr. Albert Kligman, “who was a master of Retin A. So those two people worked with me, and we shared ideas. Otherwise, I am self-made.”

A Focus on Education

As he enters 2014, Dr. Obagi is focused on spreading his knowledge about skin health science through a variety of educational platforms. “I try to educate the public through webinars and seminars,” he says. He recently trained 13 doctors who came from all over Europe at his Beverly Hills facility, and he hosts these types of seminars every two to three months “to really learn and advance,” he says. “This is the future.”

But he doesn’t want the education to stop at the medical community; he also wants to empower patients with information “There are patients who have high expectations, or patients who are demanding a miracle overnight, and unfortunately, there are doctors who will do what the patient wants and, in general, they’ll end up with a disaster,” says Dr. Obagi. “Physicians have to exert control. I will not do what my patient wants, I will do what is best for my patient.”

He calls it a “fatherly approach, or a family approach,” and believes that if physicians spend 15 minutes educating their patients about their concerns and treatment options, “I think patients would become more friendly and more open-minded.”

He points out that most doctors spend “zero time educating patients” and instead do what he calls “procedure on-demand.” Dr. Obagi explains what will work best for the patient, and does procedures according to the skin’s needs, and not the patient’s wants. “Never do a budget treatment,” he says. “If you come to me and say, ‘I only have 300 dollars for a filler.’ I will tell you: don’t do it. You will see no difference. Come back when you have the money to do it right.” And his most important piece of advice: “Never treat weak, inactive skin. Activate skin, that’s called skin conditioning, and treat it. You will get results, the patient will be happy.”

He wants patients to understand this too; that before you treat the skin, it needs to be fixed from the inside out. “If your skin is not good, no matter what you do, it’s not gonna look good,” he says. “So I feel strongly, the new trend, which I’m going to focus on in my teaching and with my lectures and my public seminars, will be based on prevention.” **ME**

Dr. Obagi’s wife, Samar, oversees business management while he focuses on research, patient care and product development.

Stacy Gueraseva is the senior editor of *MedEsthetics*.



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