

Local Hero

by Sarah Schmelling

Rick Becker, MD, brings a big city practice to Bismarck, ND

Ah, the nation's plastic surgery hot spots: Los Angeles, New York City... Bismarck, ND?

Okay, so that last one might not seem so obvious. Clearly, in sheer volume, Bismarck cannot come close to matching the number of procedures conducted in large cities like Los Angeles. Still, Rick Becker, MD, one of three plastic surgeons in Bismarck and eight total in the state (including the "new guy in Fargo now," he says), is likely to be one of the busiest practitioners you will come across—seeing more than 100 patients a week, some of whom come from as far away as Montana and California.

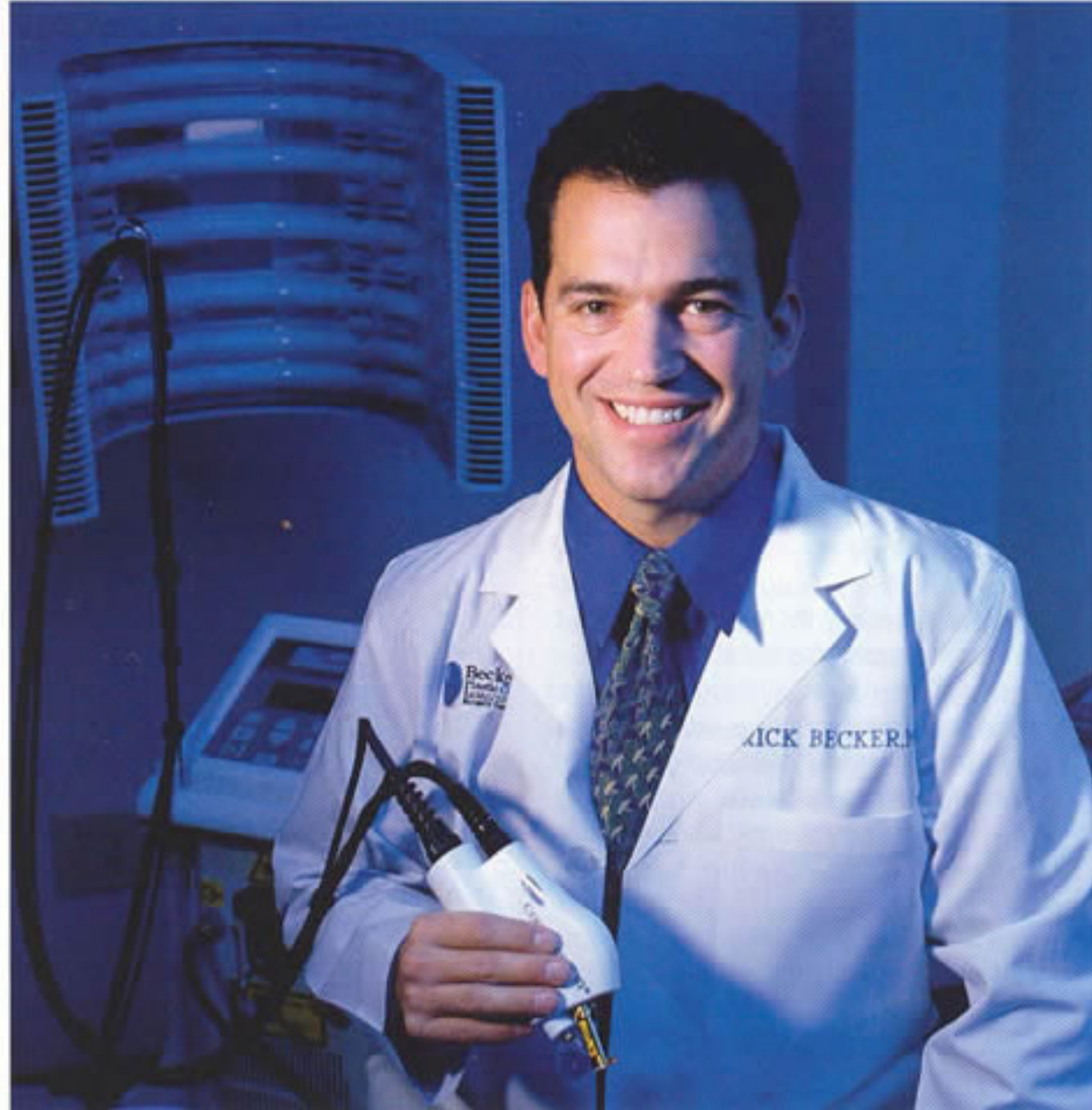
"I cover a lot of territory," says Becker. "Though North Dakota is not a populous state, the area that we draw from does bring those numbers up quite high."

In fact, lured in by more affordable procedures, cutting-edge techniques, and Becker's advanced use of telemedicine, patients are willing to drive hundreds of miles to see this physician who has made it a point to give back to the rural area he has always called home.

Prairie Roots

Brought up in Mandan, ND, across the Missouri river to Bismarck in the western part of the state, Becker says he was always a "science geek," getting interested in medicine as early as grammar school. While volunteering at a hospital during his undergraduate studies at the University of North Dakota (UND), he watched a surgical procedure taking place and was instantly hooked. "I knew that's what I wanted to do," he says.

When he started medical school, also at UND, and realized that plastic surgery was not "limited to liposuction and breast augmentation and was a full range of things, many of which required a lot of creativity," Becker decided that plastic surgery was the direction he wanted to go. Unfortunately, however, for a guy with a very strong attachment to North Dakota, studying plastic surgery would require leaving the state.



Becker attended Wayne State University in Detroit and his surgery residency brought him to the Manhattan Eye and Ear Hospital in New York, but his heart remained in North Dakota. After a fellowship in breast surgery and microvascular surgery in Little Rock, Ark (which makes him the only practitioner with this training in the Dakotas), he was finally able to return home.

Was this always his plan? "It was my hope," he acknowledges. "It depended on the logistics, and where things were with the number of plastic surgeons there. But I certainly was going to keep it in the Midwest, and my number one choice was always to go back to Bismarck."

A Rare Commodity

Being one of only a handful of plastic surgeons within the Plains states is not the only thing that makes Becker unique.

First, the cost of living in a rural area like Bismarck allows Becker to offer prices for cosmetic surgery that would be unheard of in other cities. This means he

will "actually see people from well out of state who happen to have a friend here, and they have heard about it," he says. "I have people coming in from California and Colorado because they can come stay with friends or family and actually have money left over compared to what they would have spent in their home state."

But the thing that truly makes Becker's practice stand out is his utilization of telemedicine, something that recently earned him a "Best of the Best" award among all physicians by PrimeCare, a North Dakota health care provider network. Telemedicine, according to Becker, is a technology that he has found to be necessary in covering such a vast geographic area.

For his patients, who sometimes drive 200 miles or more to see him, telemedicine offers convenience and is a time-saving mechanism. Becker says using the technology, especially postoperatively, when meeting with a patient is "just a matter of a safety check," can often save his patients several trips.

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Some of Becker's consultations are done the old-fashioned way—face-to-face.

"There are also circumstances where they may have a question—they're not sure if they're even a candidate for the type of procedure they're inquiring about—so they can have a brief consult and I can have a good look," he explains. "It's certainly not the same as hands on, but it can get fairly close. I can make a good determination of, 'Yes, you actually are a good candidate, we really should try to talk more about this. Please come in at your convenience.'"

Currently, patients go to a facility such as a hospital, clinic, or nursing home to use the technology, but Becker foresees a time in the near future when broadband becomes more ubiquitous and patients will be able to conduct telemedicine sessions from their homes.

In addition to telemedicine, Becker says he stays closely attuned to "cutting-edge" procedures and products that make his practice different from the few others in his area. These procedures, he says, "might not sound unique overall, but [they are] certainly unique for what people would expect in North Dakota." He is a frequent attendee of industry shows, reads many journals and publications, and says he tries to maintain a strong understanding of the latest trends.

Some examples of his cutting-edge practices include bringing one of the first microdermabrasion machines to his service area when they were new, using nonablative laser techniques for facial treatments and endovenous laser ablation for varicose veins, and incorporating radiofrequency technologies into his practice when they became available.

Becker notes, however, that using a new technique in a small town is much different from trying it out in a big city. New procedures truly have to be proven for safety and efficacy before being used. "What I learned immediately is that in a place like Bismarck, you can't have mistakes," he says. "If I'm in Detroit,

and I try something new and have some failures, then through trial and error I learn. But here, if I failed, I'd be out of business. Word gets around immediately in an area like this. You can jump on the bandwagon only at the point where you know [a procedure] has definitely proven itself."

Rural Challenges

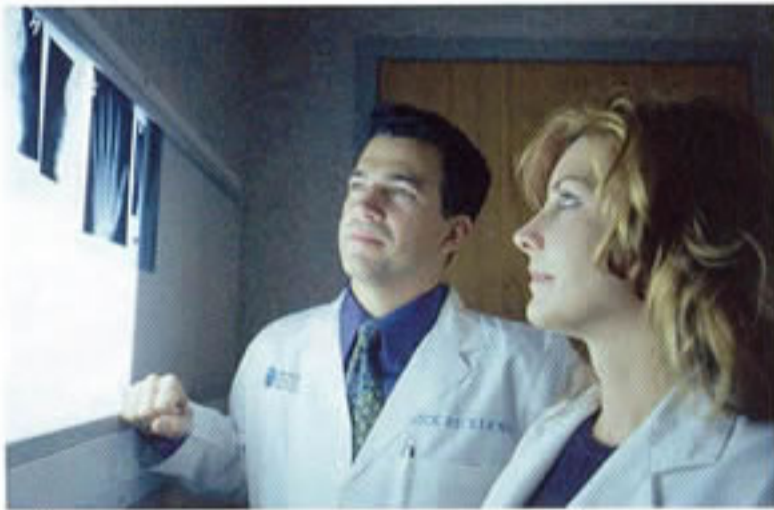
For Becker, staying in the state he loves does have some other disadvantages. A primary problem is he's the only plastic surgeon, at least in western North Dakota, who takes Medicare and Medicaid, something his financial advisers have encouraged him to drop. Becker has so far resisted doing this because he knows the average patient would have to drive hundreds of miles to find another practice where they would be covered—something that is not realistic for a person suffering from skin cancer or other major ailments.

The biggest challenge, however, is simply being too busy. When Becker started, he expected to go to a satellite clinic in Aberdeen, SD, several times a month to serve more clients, but his schedule now only allows him to go there 1 day every 2 months. "That's 150 miles one way, and that eats up time," he says. But he does plan to keep going there when he can because, as he indicates, "there's no one else around."

Being needed in this way has not allowed Becker to grow his cosmetic practice as much as he would like, and he has had to pull back on some practices that he knows can also be treated at hospitals.

"We are extremely busy, we are booked up several months out," he says. "We did 1,950 procedures in the last 12 months, including some small ones, and we saw 886 new patients—not revisits—in the past year. That's a lot." Indeed.

Becker says this is difficult for him because, "when I first started my practice, if someone had skin cancer, we would get them in within weeks, of course. Now I don't know what to say. It's a constant struggle."

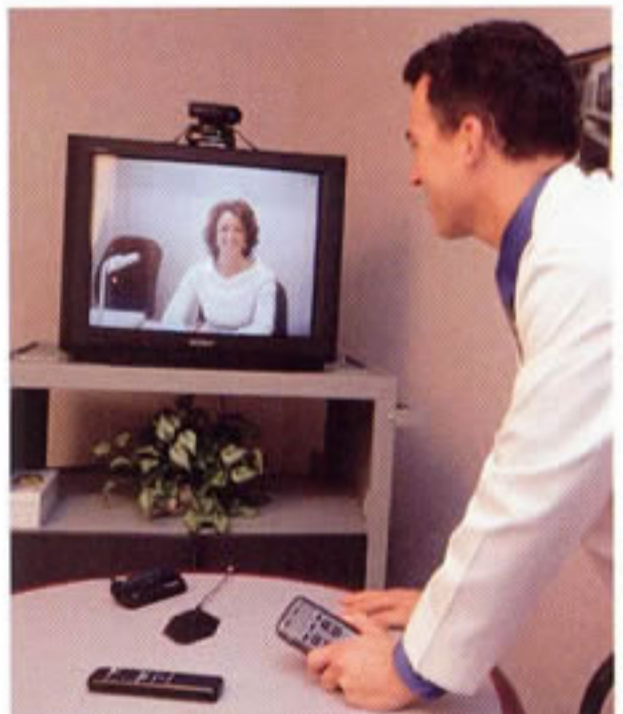


Becker and Karla Alley, RN, review a patient's x-rays.

But Becker has been able to ease some of the burden by recently hiring a nurse practitioner. "She has helped tremendously," he says, joking, "I'm able to go home in the evenings now."

And though he is disappointed in having to sacrifice some "one-on-one" time with his patients, incorporating a nurse practitioner has enabled the practice to provide more services, including a sclera therapy clinic and acne treatments.

As his client list continues to grow, he does expect to hire additional staff, but will not be bringing on partners. He also notes that he has been invited to join practices in other cities, but "of course, I like being on the river up here in the north."



Bringing modern technology to Bismarck, Becker uses telemedicine to consult with a faraway patient.

Changing Attitudes

While Becker does have a Web site and will occasionally advertise in local papers, most clients hear about him via word of mouth. He says it helps that he has a reputation of being very approachable, and for being good at "putting things in very understandable terms for the patient." He also encourages patients to get second opinions—if they are able to find them there—and believes this helps them to feel more comfortable.

For Becker, the biggest reward is a patient who is pleased with his or her results. "There's nothing better than someone who, you can see in their eyes how truly grateful they are for something that you've done," he says. "It can be humbling because you feel like you're just doing your job, and then the next thing you know you turn into a room where a person for whom you maybe did a body lift or a facial reconstruction for cancer, and you can see and feel their emotions. Then you realize that sometimes you do make a real difference."

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After studying surgery in Detroit and New York, Becker has returned home to Bismarck.

He has been surprised at the interest in cosmetic surgery in North Dakota. When he began his practice, Becker predicted he would never exceed 25% of his business being cosmetic because of his rural location. Now, he says, his practice is at 50%, and if he wasn't reluctant to give up some services, the percentage could go much higher.

Still, though many patients express interest in cosmetic surgery, some remain reticent. In North Dakota, Becker says, "people have that old German mentality of, 'if it's not absolutely necessary, how could you spend a dollar on it?'" For these patients he often provides the old braces analogy: a parent would not withhold braces for their child's crooked teeth, even though it was done purely for cosmetic reasons.

"Straightening your teeth is not done for functional reasons. It doesn't help you eat better. It helps you feel better about yourself," he says. "And that way of viewing things can be taken straight over to someone who wants to look as young as they feel—to get a little tuck in their eyes or maybe an augmentation. If it helps a person to feel better about things, to go out in the world with more confidence, who can criticize that? I try and help them realize that it's OK to do something for themselves."

And for Rick Becker, MD, practicing plastic surgery in Bismarck was exactly that kind of a decision. ■

Sarah Schmelling is a contributing writer for Plastic Surgery Products.

Branching Out: the Spa d'Athena

In 2001, Rick Becker, MD, was on the "cutting edge" again, but in very different area: he was the first practitioner to open a medical spa in North Dakota. Within its 5,000 sq ft, the Spa d'Athena includes a hydrotherapy tub, a couples treatment room, several massage and facial rooms, manicure and pedicure stations, 12 stylist booths for cutting hair, as well as services such as spray-on tanning and permanent makeup.

Becker gets almost giddy describing the beauty of the spa, from the serpentine hallway, to the marble in the steam room.

"I'm very proud of the facility," he says. "It may not have the grandiosity, or the 25-ft-high ceilings, of a spa in Las Vegas or other places, but it is very nice and we have all the services people would want."

As the spa's medical director, Becker visits the facility only a few times a week, but his association with it has brought many new clients to his practice—another benefit of being in a smaller city. "I don't know if I was working in a big town how well a spa would work to expose my practice more to the clientele who are interested in cosmetic surgery. Here," he concludes, "it's been very helpful."