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Good looks to go

New state law addresses dermatologists' concerns

By Patty Pensa

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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Boca Raton · In the mix of stores that define what's high-end -- think Tiffany & Co., Cartier and Dana Buchman -- a new business has found its niche blending consumerism with the timeless pursuit of perfection.

Considering that Town Center at Boca Raton caters to the upper crust, it's no surprise that Sleek MedSpa chose it as its first Florida location. The business, which opened in spring, joins the growing trend of "medical spas" trying to make a shot of Botox cozy and convenient.

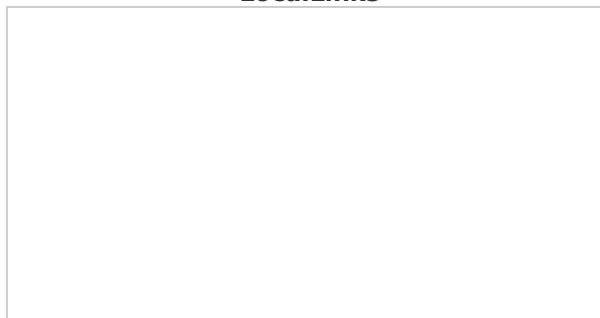
"We're just making Boca beautiful one wrinkle at a time," said Andrew Rudnick, Sleek's chief executive officer.

Business has been brisk, Rudnick said, as the store benefits from foot traffic passing Williams-Sonoma or Tiffany's to get to Saks Fifth Avenue.

The concept: Slip in an appointment while spending the day shopping. On the other end of the county, Radiance Medspa is in the trendy Downtown at the Gardens shopping center in Palm Beach.

Such spas have emerged in malls, city office buildings and

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storefronts across the country but not without attention from legislators and medical associations. A new state law that took effect Saturday says dermatologists and plastic surgeons are the only specialists who can supervise medical spas.

Though other parts of the law affect primary care doctors, too, some say medical spas were the target. A medical supervisor can run no more than two offices offering mainly skin care, and by 2011 it would be only one.

"Cosmetic skin care is a growing industry and med spas are probably going to be a vital part of that growth," said Dr. Dan Meirson, a Pompano Beach dermatologist and immediate past president of the Florida Society of Dermatology and Dermatological Surgery. "Our concern is with the safety of patients going to any med spa or doctor's office."

The state dermatological society lobbied for the law to ensure doctors are involved in patient care. Rudnick, who began his business in Boston, said the law won't hurt his medical spas. He'd simply hire different medical supervisors for future spas -- which Rudnick is planning from Miami to the Palm Beaches.

The most popular procedures at Sleek in Boca Raton are laser hair removal and Botox. Nearly 3.3 million Americans got Botox injections last year, making it the most popular procedure nationwide, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

The setting at Sleek isn't like a doctor's office. The decor is modern, with dark wood cabinets, green and white wall tile and white bowl sinks in patient rooms. Nurse practitioners or physician assistants do most of the procedures -- from laser hair removal to microdermabrasion.

Medical spas are something of a hybrid between a doctor's office and a salon, and some worry physicians are too far removed from the treatments. Dr. Steven Rosenberg, legislative chairman of the state dermatological society, has been pushing legislators for the past five years to mandate more physician involvement and supervision.

"These physicians are putting their personal wealth ahead of the health of the patients," Rosenberg said. "When patients go to a specialist, they expect to see someone with that level of training."

Rudnick countered that most patients prefer to see a nurse practitioner because they "better understand the artistry" of certain procedures, such as Botox. In the late 1990s, Rudnick had a chain of medical weight-loss centers that eventually included technicians trained in laser hair removal. The technicians hired for laser hair

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removal could do a range of skin care procedures, he said.

Medical spas will be a mainstay in malls, Rudnick predicted. The medical spa industry has grown from about 450 spas in 2003 to about 1,500 spas today, said Hannelore Leavy, executive director and founder of the International Medical Spa Society.

"We are all looking to stay younger and look healthier," she said. "Modern technology has enabled us to do this, so the spa industry embraced it because the consumer wanted it."

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