Clinic Carves Academic Niche for Plastic Surgery

By Tyler Smith

In 2011, Georgetta White underwent weight-loss surgery at Eisenhower Army Medical Center at Fort Gordon Army Base in August, Ga., where her husband was stationed. White, now 32, lost nearly 90 pounds after the gastric-sleeve procedure, which she said went well.

However, the surgery left White with a large amount of excess skin that hung over her abdomen. She didn’t like the way it looked, of course, but the overhanging skin, or pannus, was easily irritated and pulled when she moved. Her primary care physician (PCP) and surgeon in Georgia recommended that she have it removed to improve her health and quality of life.

“They said that as I got older and lost more weight, it wouldn’t get better,” White said.

After her husband transferred in 2013 to Buckley Air Force Base in Aurora, White spoke with a PCP who referred her to Brooke French, MD, an assistant professor of plastic and reconstructive surgery at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

French, who practices at University of Colorado Hospital and Children’s Hospital Colorado, directs the Cosmetics Program in the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at CU. She performed an abdominoplasty (a “tummy tuck”) and panniculectomy, the latter covered by insurance, in November 2013 to remove White’s excess skin. It took about eight weeks to recover, but White is now happily free of the large flap (see photos).

Meeting market demands. The two procedures are among a host of services that French and her colleagues – three other board-certified plastic surgeons and one physician assistant – with the CU Plastic Surgery team provide. Their division opened a new clinic in the Anschutz Health and Wellness Center in mid-March and held a grand opening event June 4.

The open house highlighted for attendees a procedure called CoolSculpting. It’s something that one might expect from an upscale retail business. The procedure, which is FDA-approved, is a non-invasive alternative to liposuction, French said. A machine freezes fat cells, which triggers an apoptotic response, or programmed cell death. French said the hour-long treatments

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do not cause the bruises, scars, or inflammation associated with traditional liposuction. People typically lose 20 percent to 25 percent of the treated fat within three months, French said.

If CoolSculpting, Botox injections, breast augmentation, eyelid lifts, and liposuction seem out of place at an academic medical center, think again, French says.

“Every surgeon tries to carve out a niche,” she said. “In academics we train residents and conduct outcomes-based research. We’re under a national microscope to improve patient satisfaction and outcomes. We’re held to a higher standard.”

In addition, she maintained, well-trained residents who are confident in running a business can improve the level of cosmetic services available in the community.

French acknowledged that generating revenue is among the department’s major goals. The clinic offers a long roster of cosmetic procedures, along with an array of products, that patients pay for out of pocket. But she also emphasized that evidence-based research is another pillar of its approach. For example, French has applied for a grant to obtain a three-dimensional camera system used to plan surgeries and evaluate treatment outcomes. The device allows surgeons to show patients what a rhinoplasty (nose job), for example, would look like post-surgery. The goal: better surgical outcomes.

Meanwhile, the new clinic, which is open half-days Tuesday through Friday, has a full schedule, French said. The team also operates a clinic with residents performing procedures at discounted rates under the direction and supervision of attending physicians.

The clinic will continue to pursue new business, French said. The June 4 event offered 30 percent discounts on the CoolSculpting procedure, which normally runs about $750-$1,500 a treatment. More open houses, with free consultations, and lunch-and-learns for primary care physicians and the general public are also on the horizon.

For her part, Georgetta White said she is very satisfied with the results of her surgery. She had a short post-surgical recovery at UCH, then wore a compression garment after the surgery to help with support and had to maintain two drains for about a month. She managed soreness with medications. She still has numbness in the area of the procedure, a known risk that she said doesn’t bother her much.
French, White said, explained the procedure thoroughly, noting that the procedure might leave her with “dog ears,” or puckering on the skin of her hips. That didn’t happen. “I could tell she was very skilled and genuinely cared,” White said.

“I’m very happy and blessed to have had a good team,” she added. “It’s a great hospital and I got great care.”

Additional cosmetic surgery, which she’d have to pay out of pocket, is a long shot, White said. “But I told Dr. French that if I win the lottery, she’s going to get a lot more work.”

French stands near a case displaying some of the products the Plastic Surgery Clinic offers.