Interview with Victoria Belo, Medical Director, Belo Medical Group

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Tags: Belo Medical Group

Dr. Belo, you established the renowned Belo Medical group in 1990 with only a small clinic in Makati; since then the company has experienced strong growth and increased popularity. Looking back at the origins, what was the driving force behind the establishment of the company?

Establishing the clinic was a personal ambition that started in my childhood. I was a fat kid and even when I finally lost the weight as a teen, then I got acne; I had a very bad skin. Since I was 11 years old I spent every week of my teenage life in a dermatologist office, waiting to be cleaned and treated, and this went on for years every week. While I was sitting there I thought to myself that I would have to find a cure for acne, and I decided that I wanted to be a dermatologist.

However, when I went into dermatology I realized that it was not what I really wanted to do. To me a doctor cures; that is what he should be doing. In dermatology there are about 5,000 diseases, some of which are incurable, like psoriasis and lupus. I was getting depressed because I had studied medicine for so long and when I finally got into my specialty I realized that it was not what I wanted. Luckily for me, I studied in Thailand at the Institute of Dermatology, where the final month of the last year of courses was devoted to laser and dermatologic surgery. It was my first introduction to lasers and I was blown away because this technology helped in removing birthmarks, scars, moles, and tattoos. I liked it because it was curative.

Since I wanted to learn more about lasers I went to Harvard. When I was in the States I was exposed to the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, which was engaged in liposuction, hair transplant, veins, and it was something that was not here in the Philippines yet. I understood that it was what I wanted since it was something result oriented; I would be able get rid of the veins and get rid of the fat. So I studied there for another year and then I came back to the Philippines where I opened my first clinic, which was devoted exclusively to cosmetic dermatology and cosmetic surgery.

In the Philippines at that time, people were just doing dermatology or plastic surgery. There was no bridge between the two yet, so in the beginning it was a struggle because people could not understand the concept. People did not understand why, as a dermatologist, I would do plastic surgery.

At that time I still wanted to be a laser doctor. However, I was exposed to this new technique of liposuction which is dermatology inspired – it is performed under local anesthesia, with no blood loss, compared to the classical surgery liposuction under general anesthesia, for which usually you have to stay in the hospital for three days and have a blood transfusion because you lose so much blood. It was a brand new way of doing liposuction. We were preparing the fat with tumescent anesthesia so it was easier to take out and there was much more of it.

People were amazed that they could go home and that there was so much more fat extracted, and it got around by word of mouth. I became very popular. I became known more as a lipo-queen than I was for the lasers and this procedure financed the whole business. At that time I had patients that would come from other cities and since I was very conscious about gasoline and ecology, I decided to open more branches in other cities so that I would be there instead of them coming all the way to me to Makati. This is how we expanded and we opened more branches within Metro Manila. It just evolved naturally and before I even realized, we were so big.

You have always been a pioneer in introducing new techniques in the Philippines, including BOTOX®, liposuction, and Thermage®. What do you consider your biggest achievement so far?

When I was younger I read that, if you want to make a difference and be remembered, you need to be first. Since the Philippines was not going to develop any new machine nor be at the forefront, then the best thing for me was be to be knowledgeable about everything that was going on in the world. It has always been an obsession for me to travel around the world.

I was looking both at Europe and at the US, and each of them were thinking that they were doing things better, but there was a big disparity among what they did. For instance, Americans were into

lasers so all the lasers and light technologies came from the States. Europe was different. In 1995 up to 2000, I was going to Europe and they were doing liposuction with a syringe – it was taking so much longer but they believed it was more elegant, quieter and less traumatic for the patients.

Before the introduction of the tumescent technique it was very traumatic to do liposuction because you were sucking out the fat and the blood vessels were bursting so you would have a lot of bleeding. However, they were not quick to pick up the new technology in Europe. The person who invented the tumescent technique was a dermatologist, Dr. Klein, who I trained with since the beginning, but the plastic surgeons did not want to learn from him because he was a dermatologist.

I took advantage of the opportunity and I am proud that there is not any clinic like Belo Medical neither in the States nor in Europe. Here they can find everything, both European and American technology, and they can do everything here, not like in the States where you have to go to a different specialist according to the treatment you want to undertake. Moreover, we are very customer oriented and we speak English well, we can offer also a concierge service if you need a nurse overtime or you want a private nurse full time, and we can do it at an average of a third of the price of doing it in the US.

Since the beginning you have been looking abroad to bring in new technologies, but now that you have set the standards in the country and positioned Belo Medical as the premier destination not only in the Philippines but in Asia as well. Are you planning to expand your operations internationally?

I am partner with a doctor in Paris. We have seen an increase in the demands from the Middle East, but they request for me to fly there – which I cannot do since I need my space to operate. Since I spend a lot of time in Paris we exchange knowledge with doctors there. Doctor Strawczynski, who is famous for liposuction (in fact he taught me the technique of liposuction of the face), invited me to join his clinic. We have just started but in September or October people from the Middle East would go in vacation in Europe so they have a clinic to go where I can meet them.

We have had an increase in the requests from the Middle East, since their skin is similar to that of the Filipinos; they have darker skin or pigmentation problems which usually American and European doctors are not very experienced with. They feel Asians should know more about hyper pigmentation and their skin type so they come here and now I can meet them also in Paris.

Besides the geographical expansion, you recently also started diversifying into food supplements and skin products. What has been the rationale for expanding into these lines and how have these

products performed so far?

Also for the skin products and the food supplements I was inspired by my personal experience. Having been insecure because of my appearance, I knew firsthand the difference it made in my life. When I had better skin, I felt more confident and I was not fat anymore. In my practices for the last 20 years I saw that people are the same, you see them blooming after a liposuction or a breast augmentation, they become more confident and outgoing. I wanted to replicate this and be able to change the lives of more people for the better.

I was always telling my daughter Cristalle that I wished I could put up something that could reach more people, because even if we have nine, going on ten clinics, it is not enough to serve 90 million people. If we can reach out more, then everybody can be beautiful and I can fulfill my Belo promise to give people a happier life by making them more beautiful and therefore more self confident.

When my daughter Cristalle decided not to become a doctor, but a businesswoman, she told me she would help me in making my other dream come true. She came up with the Belo Essentials line of products, and now she is spearheading this division. She did a study on the then 17 years of Belo and she saw that almost everybody coming in the clinics was asking for whitening, since in Asia everybody wants to be fair, and we went into that direction with a glutathione and collagen product. The glutathione is a healthy product which is also an antioxidant, and it is great, because a lot of other brands do not deliver what they promise. We also do prevention, we encourage people to start taking care of themselves early, so we combined glutathione for whitening with collagen to enhance its effect. They are food supplements or nutraceuticals.

Talking about whitening, you are competing with big established company like the Japanese Shiseido and SK-II. Do you think that Belo Medical Group has an advantage by being a clinic compared to specialized consumer and cosmetics companies?

We are not really emphasizing that aspect. I thought it would be emphasized by just saying the name Belo but it was not the case. We will probably do so in the future. For upcoming advertisements, I will be featured talking about the products to leverage on my popularity.

The main problem is that I had no idea what I was going into. Belo is just a family corporation – my daughter and me. It is a very small company. But I feel that because of the brand name, a lot of the big companies think that we are on their level or that we are direct competition. However we are much smaller, even in terms of advertising – we can afford to advertise for one month what they are doing in one day. I might have made a mistake. Looking back, I should have rather came out

with a higher end product, still mass market but maybe more expensive – now a soap is sold at 50 pesos, which corresponds to 1.10 USD but we should have probably came out with something positioned at 2.50 USD. This would have allowed us to be positioned more as a medical product rather than being seen as par with fast moving consumer goods companies.

One of the other activities that Belo Medical Group has been undertaking in the years and that you have been yourself a promoter of is the medical tourism. What is the importance of this segment for Belo Medical Group?

When I studied in Thailand, it was the beginning of medical surgery tourism in the country, and I was wondering why the Philippines would not do the same. It was my goal since the day I opened the clinic, I wanted the Philippines to be a cosmetic surgery capital in Asia. First, I feel that the Philippines is as beautiful as Thailand, and second, we speak English so much better. In many countries around the world you would also find a high number Filipino nurses, since we are a caring society by nature. Ever since our opening, we have been trying to push for medical tourism. We have a TV show that airs all over the world, I frequently give speeches abroad to medical organizations, and I attend industry events.

Up to three years ago, I think 70% of our patients were not based in the Philippines, it was a big market. We used to have the Belo Vacation Package, a concierge service dedicated to medical tourists – they would come here for a treatment, and during the recovery period we would arrange for them to go to some of the islands, thanks to some partnerships that we had with hotels. We plan to revive this program and we are currently working on building a network of suppliers.

At that time we were almost ignoring the local market, because everybody else was competing for them. But because of the recession in the US and the one in Europe that followed, the sector has shrunk. The market went down from 100% to 30%. So now we have to court the local market for stability.

You experienced a slowdown in tourists coming from the US because of the crunch, but do you think it is going to recover again? Are you trying to attract new patients from other countries that have been less affected by the crisis?

The Middle East is a strong market right now because they weathered the crisis. The US has more-or-less recovered, even if it is not as good as it used to be. In 2007-2008 we had so many patients that we almost could not handle them.

The consumption pattern has also changed; they are waiting and watching at the moment. And when they come they are more careful, they do not do everything together as before, but maybe they limit themselves to a liposuction this time. But when you have been around for twenty years you know that it is going up or down. There was another slowdown in 1998 and we saw it coming back in two years, but this one is a bit slower.

The medical tourism in the Philippines is also improving and I think it is slowly getting there. Every time there is a change in the administration it starts again. Now there is a new initiative of which we are part of, HEAL Philippines (Health and Wellness Alliance of the Philippines), an organization of different private sector parties, which includes medical tourism for wellness, dental, hospitalization, retiring, as well as aesthetics (which is represented by the Belo Medical Group). The target of the organization is to attract more medical tourists, in particular Filipinos who are working abroad and foreigners who would intend to spend the rest of their lives in the Philippines for their retirement. The main target of the Department of Tourism is indeed to attract all these potential clients to invest and spend the rest of their lives in Manila.

You have been using different alternative mediums to promote yourself to abroad countries, including the TV program Belo 101, participating in lectures and publishing articles on international journals. What strategies are you going to use in the future to target these emerging markets, for example Middle East?

The way we like to promote ourselves is through education, because many people are not aware of the new technologies. We are also doing a lot of studies and papers, since it helps us to get respect from other doctors in the US. They have heard of us because they have seen me present, and I am a fellow in their organizations such as the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), the American Society of Dermatologic Surgery (ASDS), and the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery (ASLMS).

That is why it is good to market to them, but for the Filipinos it is different. If you educate the people and they understand what you are talking about, then they will talk to their friends and the word of mouth from an authority or someone that they respect is the best. In the last two months, we have seen 23% of our clients choose Belo because of referrals or word of mouth recommendations.

On a personal level, now you have developed a reputation for yourself, but growing up and going to Harvard, how difficult was it, as a beautiful woman, to gain respect in the industry?

When I first started to practice I tried to be your “typical doctor” but it was very tiring for me to be so reserved. I know I am good and I know that I do things well, but I think my personality has worked against me at times. On the other hand, it was good for me because I have become a TV personality. The moment I went onto TV they kept inviting me to every show. I am a doctor they can relate to since I am very good at simplifying complex things and I talk a lot. However, because of the way I am, some people think that I do not know what I am doing. But I have been here for twenty years and my record speaks for itself.

I face similar challenges in the States when I present a paper. Luckily for me, I know my weaknesses and I try to turn them into an advantage. I come from a third world country, and I am a woman, so the other doctors do not feel that I am a threat and they are very willing to teach me. I am grateful to them because they opened their doors for me.

However beauty is important to me since I work to make people more beautiful. I always said that I would stop working before turning 55 because I thought I would be too old and I would look horrible. I do not want to look bad for my patients because they come here for beauty. But since I still look good I will stretch it a bit. I love working here, it is really fun. I think this is such a beautiful profession, because people who come are not sick, nobody dies and it is all about beauty and being happy.

I read a book last week that said that there are three elements that make a person happy at work. The first being autonomous; the second is that you improve every day – so for me this means trying to figure out for what to do next, what is new. The third aspect, which is really the most important, is that you always have to make a difference. I feel my best reward is not the money but it is making people happy and changing their lives, and in this sense mine is a happy profession.

After the first twenty years of success, how are you going to combine the autonomy, the constant improvement and making a difference to shape Belo in the next ten years?

The bad thing about me is that I never plan. I am a gut feeling girl, and I pray a lot. I always want to improve, and I always want to get better. I always talk to my customers and ask them how we could improve Belo Medical Group.

What I am trying to do now is to divide the business into segments. When we got all the celebrity clientele we became an aspirational brand, so we also got a lot of regular people. It is difficult to cater towards both segments and we have lost the very high end clients because they feel they want something secret, or they do not want to be seen. Whatever the reason for wanting extra privacy, we have to take care of these clients, so we are planning to have a private lounge, with a

private exit; the kind of service that we want to give to our patients is the one of a five star hotel.

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