

Area physician Ralph Zipper breaks new ground in profession, reaches out to rising colleagues, offers a two-year fellowship in urogynecology and aesthetic gynecology at his Melbourne practice

By Ken Datzman

Over a career that has spanned two decades in the evolving field of urogynecology, Johns Hopkins-trained Ralph Zipper has always worked to stay at the forefront of his medical specialty, which has helped earn him a national reputation among his colleagues as a progressive practitioner.

Now Dr. Zipper, who has trained more than 1,000 surgeons in his techniques, is reaching out to a new generation of urogynecologists.

As principal and founder of Zipper Urogynecology Associates in Melbourne, Dr. Zipper's practice is sponsoring a two-year fellowship in urogynecology and aesthetic gynecology. The ZUA Fellowship will train a board-certified or board-eligible gynecologist in urogynecology and aesthetic gynecology. The latter is an emerging area of medicine.

"As far as we know, and we have done quite a bit of research, this will be the first combined urogynecology and aesthetic gynecology fellowship in the country," said Dr. Zipper, who recently opened his practice's new custom-designed, freestanding Key West-themed 18,000-square-foot facility on South Harbor City Boulevard. "We are looking right now to enroll the first fellow this summer."

The position is being advertised on a number of Internet databases geared to urogynecologists, said Dr. Zipper, who will manage the fellowship program. "We are going to be critical in our review of applicants. It is exhausting to train surgeons. And I am going to spend the next two years of my life doing that. I want to believe it's going to be a very good experience."

Dr. Zipper completed his graduate training at New York City's Mount Sinai School of Medicine. His post-doctoral work and urogynecology training was performed at the renowned Johns Hopkins Hospital. He dedicated the final year of his training at Johns Hopkins to pelvic reconstructive surgery.

"Still, I had to learn through trial and tribulation how to solve problems as I began to practice. This fellowship will provide physicians with additional training after they leave their residency programs so they won't have to develop these skill sets on their own. I and many of my peers who now teach have developed these skill sets on our own because there wasn't specialty training at the time."

Urogynecology is a subspecialty of gynecology and urology. These physicians treat disorders including prolapse, incontinence, urinary-tract infections, and pelvic-floor dysfunction. An aesthetic gynecologist is a gynecologist, urologist, or urogynecologist who specializes in the restoration or rejuvenation of the female genitalia, including vaginal looseness,

enlarged or irregular labia, or loss of sexual satisfaction.

New research by the American Urogynecologic Society indicates that an estimated 28 million American women will suffer from at least one pelvic-floor disorder in 2010 and that number will increase to 43 million in 2050.

Because of the substantial increase in numbers, it is important to continue to train physicians who specialize in caring for women suffering from pelvic-floor and other disorders.

Researchers also must continue to advance their understanding of the causes of these conditions in order to develop effective prevention and treatment strategies, the report said.

"One of the goals of the fellowship is to train urogynecologists to listen to what patients are saying and to first go through a 'common-sense algorithm' of non-surgical options for the patient. Surgery procedures will not always be avoided. But we will emphasize in our program never to operate on a patient just because you have the skills to do so," he said.

In the early 2000s, the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology agreed to certify a small number of fellowships in urogynecology, "but there are many fellowships around the nation that the ABOG does not certify. In my opinion, there is not any uniformity in the teaching programs that guarantee the people who are completing specialty training in urogynecology have the necessary skill sets. That is why I have decided to start a fellowship in Melbourne," Dr. Zipper said.

He is hoping that the newly launched American Board of Aesthetic Gynecology, a specialty association, will play a role in the future in creating fellowship programs geared to providing a uniformity of training for practitioners. The ABAG was started eight months ago, said Dr. Zipper, who sits on its board.

"We're interviewing two division heads, from two very respectable universities, to chair the board. They are both well-published physicians. The board has established critical criteria for who will be eligible, how cases will be submitted, and other key factors. We will not certify people who have not attended board-certified residency programs in either gynecology or urology," he said.

Once the board-eligible or board-certified gynecologists or urologists complete their training they will be eligible to take an examination and apply for certification by the ABAG.

The ZUA Fellow will be exposed to leading technologies that Dr. Zipper has developed for performing aesthetic-gynecology procedures, such as vaginal rejuvenation. Two of his lasers are now in



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Dr. Ralph Zipper, owner and founder of Zipper Urogynecology Associates, is sponsoring what is believed to be the first combined fellowship in urogynecology and aesthetic gynecology in the nation. His practice is in the recruiting process and looking to enroll its first fellow this summer. The two-year program will be managed by Dr. Zipper, a Johns Hopkins-trained urogynecologist.

clinical trials. "One of the trials is for women with chronic pelvic pain and pain during intercourse. As many as 50 percent of all new visits to gynecologists and family practitioners are for pelvic pain or pain during intercourse," Dr. Zipper said.

Trials with the lasers began about six months ago, "and at this point about 75 percent of patients are improving. That is exciting," said Dr. Zipper, who founded Laser Gyn Institute, an educational institution designed to help women better understand aesthetic gynecology.

The trial for pelvic pain and pain during intercourse is still accepting candidates, he said.

Dr. Zipper founded GyneShape, a company that manufactures GynePulse VRL and Diamond VRL lasers used in his patented vagina and labial-rejuvenation procedures. He is credited with creating what is believed to be the first incisionless vaginal-rejuvenation procedure.