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THE BEAUTY EXPERT

October, 2018

## THE SECRET KEEPERS

For elite dermatologists, superstar clients are a big challenge. One slip-up could land in the media as fast as you can say “TMZ.” And some of their best work goes uncredited. Meet the doctors of discretion. By Sarah Van Boven

Following the now-canonical *Fight Club* model, the first rule of being a celebrity dermatologist is that you don’t talk about the celebrities you treat. (That is, until they talk about you on the record to the press—but more about that in a moment.)

The second rule of being a celebrity dermatologist is that you owe any fame of your own to your very first celebrity patient, the one who discreetly whispered your name to her agent, and her trainer, and her costars on location, and in doing so set off the cascade of referrals that made your career the stuff of skin-care lines and TV appearances that it is today.

For New York City dermatologist Patricia Wexler, that first A-list client was the result of pure serendipity. “I was seven months pregnant and had just opened my practice in the West Village when the highest-paid model in the country literally walked in off the street because she saw my sign,” says Wexler, who has been publicly linked to Donna Karan, Rita Ora, Iman, and many other bold-faced names. The model was just about to be on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, but that particular day she had a rash she needed treated, and she didn’t have a dermatologist. “She referred me to a friend who happened to be that year’s Ford Supermodel of the Year, and that person referred me to their friends, and so it went,” Wexler says.

Dermatologist Ava Shamban, who has offices in Santa Monica and Beverly Hills, swears by referrals from Hollywood makeup artists. “Makeup artists know we make their jobs easier,” she says. Dermatologist Harold Lancer, on the other hand, did not end up treating the likes of Beyoncé, Scarlett Johansson, and Victoria Beckham in a 12,000-square-foot Beverly Hills office thanks to entertainment connections: “It was because I was extraordinarily nerdy,” he explains. Lancer did his residency under the legendary Harvard Medical School dermatologist Thomas Fitzpatrick (whose scale classifying skin complexions into six types is still used around the world), and in 1980, Lancer found himself shadowing Fitzpatrick as he treated a patient by the name of Katharine Hepburn.

Kate gave great references, and history took its course. “In the world we’re talking about, advertising wouldn’t just be worthless; it would be counterproductive,” Lancer proclaims. “To this day, [success] is solely based on word of mouth—and being the soul of discretion.” Or as Shamban puts it, a bit more concisely, “I may kiss, but I never tell.” Still, when an A-list dermatologist runs into an A-list client shopping at Fred Segal, or on the red carpet at a charity event, or even at a dinner party, that A can stand for “awkward.” The general rule is never to acknowledge knowing a patient unless the patient does so first. That’s not always the easiest rule to follow. Wexler still cringes when she thinks of the one time she went to *Vanity Fair*’s famed Oscar party. “I got invited every year, and I went once. Well, it was a total nightmare. I didn’t know where to look. I don’t acknowledge patients unless they say hello first. I don’t know why I thought it was a good idea, but I never did that again.”

