

"A JOURNEY WITH OUR PATIENTS"

BY KASHA STOLL



NORTHLAND PLASTIC SURGERY RESTORES FUNCTION AND APPEARANCE THROUGH RECONSTRUCTIVE AND COSMETIC SURGERIES, ADDRESSING TRAUMATIC INJURIES, CANCER, BURNS AND MORE

"The words 'plastic surgery' mean very different things to different people," said Dr. Jason Fowler of Northland Plastic Surgery, noting that for some, it may mean nonsurgical and/or cosmetic surgery related to the effects of aging or childbearing. However, "If you were in an accident and went through the windshield," he noted, "plastic surgery means repairing your body and getting your function back."

While the four surgeons at this clinic perform procedures including facelifts and tummy tucks, they all work at the clinic because they want to do so much more – and are relied upon to do so much more. In fact, the caseload at Northland Plastic Surgery, located at 1420 London Road, is about 75 percent reconstructive and 25 percent cosmetic.

It provides a full range of both reconstructive and cosmetic services and also has an on-site Skin Care Center. Specialties include traumatic injuries, burn care, hand surgery, brow and eyelid surgery, microsurgery, liposuction, laser facial resurfacing and more. The surgeons also treat people with injuries from frost bite, dog bites, saws or other tools and falls from ladders as well as car, ATV and motorcycle accidents.

"The great thing about plastics is the wide variety of surgery we do – essentially everywhere in the body," said Dr. Dean Weber. "If you are a heart surgeon, you are doing the same basic surgery over and over. With plastics, it is very unusual for me to do the same operation more than once per week. And I treat a variety of patients, from kids to people in their 90s."



“We have always been available. We are the only plastic surgeon team in Duluth. We have earned a solid position, which we are proud of.”

– DR. ANDREW BAERTSCH, CLINIC FOUNDER



The surgeries are also often far from routine and can require a lot of creativity and artistry.

“For example, the defects from cancer or injuries are all different,” said Dr. Andrew Baertsch, who founded the clinic in 1992. “Everyone is different, so the solution for everyone is different. That makes it fun as a career. In plastic surgery, you always run up against something you haven’t seen before and need to figure out how to approach [it] and repair.”

The surgeons also help other highly skilled physicians in Duluth during difficult cases.

“We talk to other board-certified doctors – orthopedics, neurosurgeons, family medicine, dermatology,” Fowler explained. “They will say, ‘Can you help me with this? I am a little outside of my scope.’ Maybe it is a cardiac surgeon [who has a patient] with a wound that won’t heal because there is no bone and no way to cover it.”

FILLING A REGIONAL NEED

When Baertsch was looking to launch the clinic, he settled on Duluth for two reasons: 1) there was a large regional medical center in town, and 2) the area was “very underserved in plastic surgery.”

He opened Northland Plastic Surgery and worked as the sole surgeon for four years until Weber joined him in 1996. The team of surgeons expanded when Dr. Thomas Rishavy joined in 2002 and Dr. Fowler joined in 2017. The four men are all equal partners in the clinic.





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Northland Plastic Surgery also employs another 11 people, including surgical and clinical assistants, an advanced practice esthetician and front-of-the house and office workers. Together, they care for patients who come from throughout Northeast Minnesota, Northwest Wisconsin, Michigan’s Upper Peninsula and even Canada.

Patients can enjoy free off-street parking and an amazing view of Lake Superior. They also experience a greatly appreciated degree of privacy.

“When you sit in a lobby, whether it is for a wellness check or cancer or any type of service, some people are incredibly private about their health care, and they don’t want to see their neighbor,” said Clinic Administrator Rachael Perlinger. “We like to think of our clinic as a quiet and intimate setting. It doesn’t have the hustle and bustle of other medical centers.”

Perlinger is clearly a proud spokesperson and advocate of Northland Plastic Surgery’s dedication to providing comprehensive patient care. She understands and addresses common misperceptions about plastic surgery. “Plastic surgeons are reconstructive surgeons,” she said. “Breast cancer is a very clear example. A woman who has a mastectomy may want to have reconstructive surgery.





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– DR. DEAN WEBER

“We also do a lot of hand surgery,” Perlinger added, noting a table saw accident as an example. “We do reconstruction of the face; a Northland example is a hockey puck to the face. There could be a trip and fall, or an accident. If you lose a finger or a toe, we do the replantation.”

The doctors do some simple procedures at the Northland Plastic Surgery clinic, but the surgeries they perform take place at Lakewalk Surgery Center, Essentia Health and St. Luke’s Hospital.

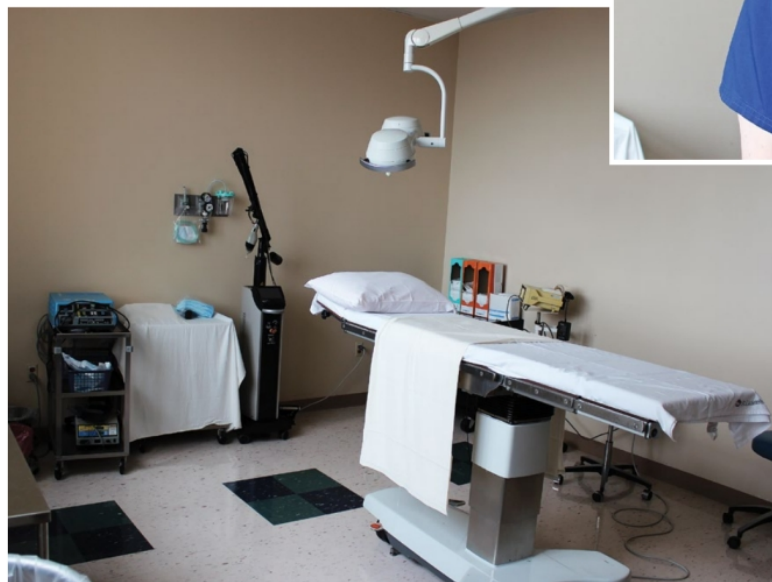
“It’s really important to us that we use the right facility for the right patient at the right time,” Perlinger explained. “What are their preferences or insurance needs? Do they need specialized equipment? We take all that into account when deciding where the surgery should take place.”

Of course, emergencies happen at all hours of the day and night, and those surgeries are done at the local hospitals. One of the doctors at Northland Plastic Surgery is always on call for emergency surgeries.



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– DR. THOMAS RISHAVY



TRAUMA, RECONSTRUCTIVE AND COSMETIC SURGERIES

The doctors at Northland Plastic Surgery are certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery and are active members of the American Burn Association and American Society of Plastic Surgeons. All four doctors perform three basic types of surgery: trauma, reconstructive and cosmetic. And the types often overlap.

In addition to the types of trauma Perlinger mentioned earlier, the surgeons treat all the burn victims at the Essentia Health Miller Dwan Burn Center. That treatment often includes skin grafts. Summertime is the peak season for trauma and burns.

“I think people are shocked at how often we get called in, how much trauma stuff we take care of,” said Weber. “During the summer, there are more tourists – it’s a larger volume of people. They are outside, having campfires and going four-wheeling. More accidents are going to happen. And then throw in some alcohol.”

The doctors treat a lot of frostbite and snowmobile injuries in the winter and often perform cosmetic surgeries during the spring and fall.

The goal of reconstructive surgery is to “rebuild or reconstruct what a person had prior to an illness or injury,” said Perlinger.

“We literally put extremities back on,” Rishavy added. “We work on facial and jaw fractures and do general reconstructive surgeries, like for cancer incisions. We literally do everything.”

Baertsch said he will “carry for life” the memory of a trauma/reconstruction surgery he performed some years ago. A young man nearly amputated his arm at the elbow. The joint was pulled apart and the veins were destroyed. However, the nerves were still intact, and the patient was able to wiggle his fingers, even though his forearm was basically detached. Baertsch was able to reattach the arm and reestablish circulation. “We kept his arm alive and he had really good function” following the surgery, he said.

Some reconstructive surgeries are also cosmetic in nature. “A rhinoplasty [nose surgery] may be reconstructive if it is necessary because of trauma,” Fowler explained by way of example. “Maybe you got busted in the face with a soccer ball years ago and can’t sleep because your septum is broken – you can’t breathe right. You can have surgery and reestablish your breathing.”

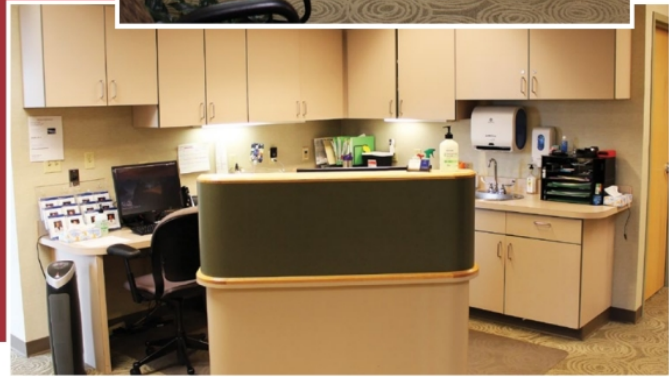
TOUCHING THE HEART

For every doctor on the team, it feels very rewarding to see their patients enjoy the benefits and results of their surgery or treatment.

"From a professional standpoint, operations are technically difficult. So I get gratification from a technical standpoint. But I get no less gratification when patients are happy," said Weber. "As an example, you get gratification if you run a marathon and complete it. And you feel the same way with a 5K."

Rishavy talked about a patient of several years ago who had lost a lot of weight and had excess skin as a result that was uncomfortable and hard to care for. He performed a lower body lift, which is like a tummy tuck, but also involves the back and hips.

"A year later, at the consultation, the patient gave me a hug and was crying," said Rishavy. "The patient said, 'You changed my life - I am a completely different person. I can fit normal clothes. I feel like I have my life back.' That was probably one of the best thank-yous I ever received."

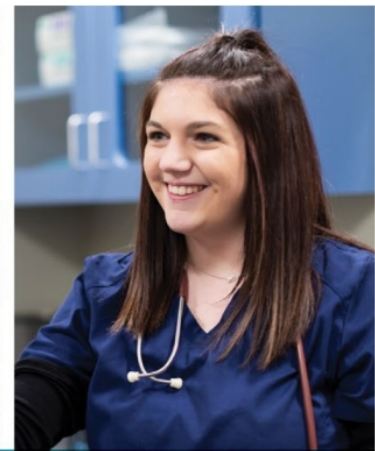


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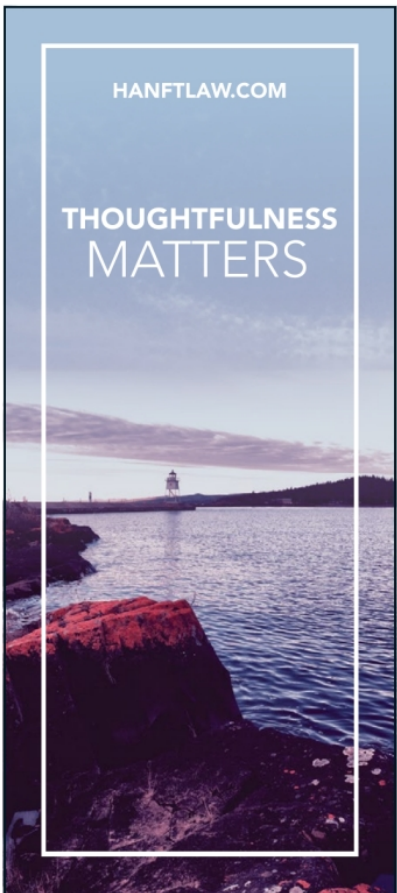
- CLINIC ADMINISTRATOR RACHAEL PERLINGER



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“Skin care is important for your self-esteem. When you feel good about yourself, you are healthy and take better care of yourself.”

– ADVANCE PRACTICE ESTHETICIAN
ARDIE BESSER

Fowler shared a similar story about a woman who felt like breast cancer had stolen her femininity. The patient told him, “Yesterday I painted my nails. For the first time in 10 years, I painted my nails, because I feel like a woman again.”

THE SKIN CARE CENTER

Ardie Besser, who is an advance practice esthetician at Northland Plastic Surgery, works with patients at the on-site Skin Care Center to improve their skin condition and appearance.

“Skin care is important for your self-esteem,” Besser said. “When you feel good about yourself, you are healthy and take better care of yourself.”

She offers six skin care services: microneedling, lamprobe, microdermabrasion, therapeutic facials, TCA acid peels and SkinCeuticals micropeels.

“Microneedling is the newest thing out,” Besser said. “Twelve sterile needle probes vibrate on the skin and puncture the skin. That releases the collagen, which firms the skin. It takes about an hour, and it is great for acne scarring and fine lines and wrinkles.”

Lamprobe is not common in the area, and Besser said many people don’t know about it. The lamprobe combines high frequency and radio technology to get rid of skin irregularities like benign moles, skin tags, broken capillaries, cherry angiomas and pimples.

“People have been told their whole lives that they have to have bumps or moles cut out, and they would rather have a mole than a scar,” Besser said. “This takes seconds to do, and it doesn’t leave a scar unless people pick off the scab.”

Microdermabrasion and acid peels help with pigmentation, fine lines and wrinkles.

Besser said the clinic provides several advantages over similar treatments at a spa. First, the microdermabrasion machine is medical grade. Second, since there are doctors on-site, patients can get prescription skin care products like Retin A, which is used to fight wrinkles, and hydroquinone, which helps fade sunspots.


“WE WALK A JOURNEY WITH OUR PATIENTS”

The team at Northland Plastic Surgery does more than just treat people. “We walk a journey with our patients,” Perlinger said. “We are there for the consultations, decisions about the surgery itself, during the surgery

and for post-operative care. For a cancer patient, that can be close to a year. It is our privilege to be able to take care of the community."

Baertsch said that Northland Plastic Surgery grew faster and larger than he expected, and he is proud of the clinic that he and the other surgeons have created.

"We have been here for a long time and grown the practice," he said. "We have always been available. We are the only plastic surgeon team in Duluth. We have earned a solid position, which we are proud of."


The staff will be glad to answer any questions about clinic procedures and services currently available as state restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic ease. Information is also available at northlandplasticsurgery.com. 

Kasha Stoll is a Duluth-based freelance writer.

PRAISE FROM PATIENTS

Perlinger said the clinic receives wonderful feedback from clients, some of whom also go online and post reviews. Here are some of their comments:

- "Five years after a mastectomy, I decided to explore the possibility of breast reconstruction. From my first to my most recent meeting with Dr. Fowler, I could not be more pleased. He took time to listen to each question I posed, even if it was for the second or third time. He took time to answer each question thoroughly, offering both guidance and options. This left me feeling cared for, safe and confident in my choices. Beyond that, the skill with which he has completed my surgeries has left me feeling at home in my body, attractive and without any regrets!"
- "I'm glad I saw Dr. Rishavy for my finger injury. He was good at explaining what was wrong and what he could do. The procedure was quick and there's no pain anymore. He was great."
- "Dr. Fowler did surgery to correct my drooping eyelids that impacted my vision. Dr. Fowler explained everything clearly, was willing to answer any questions or concerns I had and just really put me at ease. The result was outstanding! I just went for my annual eye exam and my vision was corrected back to 20/20 with the surgery."
- "Dr. Weber was amazing. I was burned very bad on my right side. He did skin grafting and was very courteous. He was very good at explaining everything about my procedure, medications, etc. My arm looks awesome, and even my other doctors have told me that it is the best skin graft they have ever seen!"
- "I've been seeing Ardie for over a year now. My skin has never been better! Ardie is extremely knowledgeable from skincare to makeup application. Everyone, from the moment I walk in the door, is so kind and professional. I highly recommend Ardie and this office to anyone. Five big stars for this team!"



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