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## WOMEN IN BUSINESS

LOCAL WOMEN - REAL SUCCESS

### She finds her inspiration where medicine and creativity meet

By ELAINE HESSER

**FOR EVERY** product that's patented and makes a fortune for its inventor, there are thousands that never make it past a fleeting inspiration or a little bit of tinkering in the toolshed. What makes the difference?

You could ask Dr. Gail Lebovic of Pebble Beach. After a few minutes of conversation with her, it's obvious that she's pretty darned smart. An hour later, when her energy hasn't flagged, it's clear that the surgeon, inventor and entrepreneur has applied that dynamism to her parallel careers.

#### Welby, Kildare, Lebovic

Her persistence and willingness to overcome obstacles must have come — at least in part — from her family. Her parents came to the United States from Czechoslovakia after World War II, when both were orphaned. The young adults arrived on the East Coast with excellent work ethics and zero knowledge of English.

Her father was a tailor who ended up "working in several New York sweatshops," Lebovic said. But he and his wife enrolled in English classes and saved half of everything they earned. When they'd had enough of toiling away for others, they partnered with her father's brother to start a clothing manufacturing company.

They ended up in the Los Angeles area, where they invested in real estate and Lebovic's mother opened a clothing store. "It's the classic American dream, right?" said Lebovic.

The couple never pushed their children toward specific careers. "All they ever cared about was us getting an education," she said. She'd seen Drs. Kildare and Welby on television, and after she was injured doing gymnastics at 14, she said, "I was in love with my orthopedic surgeon." She decided that practicing medicine — which looked "so organized and deliberate" — was exactly what she wanted to do.

She didn't think of herself as a trailblazer, although in high school she petitioned the administration to let her take wood shop instead of



Dr. Lebovic of Pebble Beach is a surgeon who has more than 50 US patents to her name.

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**INNOVATE** cont. from page 1W

the home economics class expected of young women in the late 1960s and '70s. She completed her bachelor's degree in physiology and anatomy at Cal in 1979, followed by



PHOTO/NASOCLENZ.COM

Instructional photos show how easy it is to use Dr. Gail Lebovic's invention, NasoClenz.

a master's in endocrinology before finishing med school at George Washington University and doing her surgical residency at Stanford.

Somewhat surprisingly, upon arriving at Stanford in the late 1980s, she was told that if she wanted to do surgery, she should go into obstetrics and gynecology. "I hated it," she recalled. But when one of the men dropped out of the surgical program, she was allowed to transfer in and became an oncoplastic surgeon specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer, including reconstructive work.

While she was in medical school, though, Lebovic's inventive side emerged. She developed a small notebook formatted to help her — and eventually her classmates and even instructors — keep track of all the patients they saw. "My dad started selling them to medical schools," she remembered.

Since then, Lebovic has pursued medicine and innovation with equal enthusiasm. "I love doing surgery. There's nothing like it. I've practiced for over about 20 years now. But I was destined to do this stuff, too."

"This stuff" is a collection of inventions and companies she has developed and sold. She holds more than 50 U.S. patents and said they all began pretty much the same way — she'd see a problem and imagine a solution, thinking, "People need this and I can't believe no one's thought of this."

### Squishy swab

Lebovic's most recent innovation is NasoClenz, initially marketed at Carmel Drug Store on Ocean Avenue and Central Avenue Pharmacy in Pacific Grove. It comes with a specially shaped, pleasantly squishy swab (it resembles a swirl of soft-serve ice cream) and an anti-bacterial gel intended to clean out the nose once or twice a day, "Just like brushing your teeth," Lebovic said.

The inspiration came from her surgical experience. Believe it or not, she said, you can significantly decrease the risk of postoperative infection by keeping the inside of the nose clean. She explained that if you went down to the beach — or anywhere, really — and swabbed people's noses, you'd find harmful bacteria in 40 percent of them.

Lebovic noted that most people touch their noses and faces frequently, and if that leads to bacteria being transferred from the nose to a wound, it increases the risk of infection.

The process of developing the gel — one that would kill harmful bacteria without drying out or harming the nasal passages — was a long one, Lebovic said, but they found a formula that gets the job done safely. And as it turns out, cleaning the nose is also helpful for people who haven't had surgery.

Why test market it on the Monterey Peninsula, with its

**PATENTS** cont. on next page

**PATENTS** *cont. from previous page*

envious air quality? “We have a lot of people with allergies here,” she said, adding that 84 percent of those folks find improvement if they swab twice a day.

If you use a neti pot or saline rinse for your sinuses, Lebovic said that cleaning the lower part of the nose with NasoClenz before rinsing prevents pushing the stuff in the lower nose further into the respiratory system. The product also helps people who use CPAP devices for sleep apnea to feel more comfortable.

While many of her other medical inventions are quite technical, the Mammopad is easy to understand. Beginning in middle age, women should have annual or bi-annual mammograms. After the first one, it’s a little surprising so many of them do it again.

For the uninitiated, the screening involves sandwiching the breasts, one at a time, between two glass plates. There’s frequent repositioning and adjusting in what feels like bizarre game of Twister, as scans are done from several angles.

Before each image, the breast is compressed between the plates. Patients describe the sensation as anywhere from uncomfortable to downright painful.

In fact, said Lebovic, “Pain was one of the top three reasons women wouldn’t go for their mammograms. They’re afraid of pain, a diagnosis and the cost. Mammograms are a lifesaving procedure. That was my whole career.” She and engineer George Herman, with whom she’s worked with for more than 25 years, developed a special foam that is invisible to x-rays and won’t interfere with imaging, and used it to make cushioning pads that she says have benefited more than 100 million women.

(Since she invented the Mammopad, newer technology — 3D mammograms — has begun to become more widely available, eliminating most of that unpleasantness.)

**Always learning**

Every innovation comes with tons of research and learning new things, which Lebovic said she enjoys. She also navigates the patent system and the FDA’s policies and procedures (with help from attorneys), sets up businesses to make and sell the product, and comes up marketing plans to “tell the invention’s story” to potential customers.

Although she’s done well for herself as an inventor, Lebovic insisted, “I don’t think about the money part. I don’t start with, ‘I want to make a lot of money.’” She said that while practicing medicine has been rewarding — “I make a difference one-on-one as a surgeon” — her inventions, help millions of people. She’s won numerous awards from medical, educational and business groups for her work.

When she’s not here, walking along the beach or going

for bicycle rides, Lebovic also enjoys homes in Texas and New Zealand. She’s still licensed to practice medicine in California and Texas, and said she keeps busy helping people who call her for advice on navigating the healthcare system. Maybe she can come up with some innovations to help the rest of us do that more effectively, too.

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