



Vivian W. Bucay, MD

Dr. Vivian Bucay is a prominent and respected physician in the field of cosmetic dermatology. She holds the title of Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Physician Assistant studies at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio, Texas. She is also the author or co-author of many publications, and has made numerous presentations both nationally and internationally. In 2006, Dr. Bucay was diagnosed with amelanotic malignant melanoma. As the first participant in our new Physician Focus department, Dr. Bucay answers questions on her experience as a melanoma patient and how that has affected her practice as a clinician.

Can you discuss your experience with melanoma and whether it impacted your outlook as a physician/dermatologist?

"I do a lot of cosmetic dermatology in my practice, and what I've learned is that every cosmetic patient has medical concerns and every medical patient has cosmetic concerns," says Dr. Bucay. "That's why I recommend always being thorough in addressing patient concerns no matter what they may be there to see you for," she observes. But beyond addressing a patient's potentially varied concerns, Dr. Bucay stresses a broader message about the importance of erring more on the side of caution. "If anyone has something slightly unusual, give it your fullest attention," she urges.

Dr. Bucay explains that her experience melanoma made her keenly aware of the difficulties patients endure as sufferers of skin disease. "As physicians, we may tend to sometimes underestimate the side effects of treatment. I would tell patients, 'You're going to feel tired as you undergo this treatment.' But having been on that side of it as a patient — undergoing a wide excision, extensive physical therapy, and long trials of intensive therapy, I have a lot more empathy for patients and feel more qualified to explain to them what they will experience," says Dr. Bucay.

As a dermatologist, what would you say you have learned from having had melanoma?

Dr. Bucay is a strong believer that health and beauty are not mutually exclusive (as the banner on her website reads). "Whether I am treating a patient for a medical or cosmetic condition, I've learned never to trivialize the patient's concerns," says Dr. Bucay. Many times they are interconnected, she observes. "Whether you are primarily treating skin cancers or performing cosmetic surgery, people still want to look their best," says Dr. Bucay. Looking better and feeling better are often intertwined, she observes. "What makes this specialty so unique is that it deals with both health and beauty."

Given your unique experience, what advice can you offer fellow clinicians treating patients for melanoma?

"I would suggest never take away a patient's hope. We can often be clouded from our own experiences, recognizing that certain patients may have more likelihood of favorable outcomes than others," says Dr. Bucay. Nevertheless, clinicians should advocate for all patients — no matter the individual circumstances — and exhaust all options. "My chance of survival was very slim, so I recognize the importance of always having hope." Finally, she adds that part of instilling that hope is lobbying the patient to become her or his own advocate and always put their best face forward. ■