

# Japanese doctors visit Vancouver to learn from local plastic surgeon



Dr. Allen Gabriel, left, explains his surgical decisions to Japanese surgeons Hiroko Taneda, right, and Mika Watanabe, center, during a panniculectomy at PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center Wednesday. Taneda and Watanabe flew to Vancouver to observe Gabriel operate.

By **Marissa Harshman**, Columbian Health Reporter  
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Dr. Allen Gabriel experienced a first in his operating room last week: international visitors.

Two Japanese plastic surgeons cleared their schedules, packed their bags and hopped on a plane to spend a week in Vancouver with Gabriel.

Gabriel is chief of plastic surgery at PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center and Southwest Medical Group Plastic Surgery. He's been a vocal advocate of women's breast reconstruction rights following mastectomies and has made three trips to Haiti to provide surgical care.

A Japanese sales representative heard Gabriel speak at a National Society of Plastic Surgeons event and urged the up-and-coming Japanese surgeons to reach out to Gabriel.

Drs. Mika Watanabe and Hiroko Taneda did just that and spent most of the week in the operating room with Gabriel.

"We heard the reputation about Dr. Gabriel," Taneda said.

Watanabe works at Kawasaki Municipal Hospital in Kanagawa, Japan, and performs reconstructive and general plastic surgery procedures. Taneda works at the International University of Health and Welfare Mita Hospital in Tokyo where she specializes in breast reconstruction surgery, aesthetic breast surgery and eye surgery.

They turned to Gabriel to learn more about breast reconstruction and cosmetic surgery procedures.

Taneda said she has performed many breast reconstruction surgeries. However, she hoped to learn more about the use of expanders from Gabriel. Expanders are inserted during the mastectomy surgery to stretch the skin of a woman's chest and prepare her for breast implant surgery later.

Expanders are an up-and-coming technique in Japan, Taneda said. For Gabriel, though, it's common procedure.

"He's so specialized," Taneda said.

The surgeons also were interested in studying Gabriel's techniques for other cosmetic procedures.

On Wednesday, Gabriel had a packed schedule with six breast surgeries and one panniculectomy, where excess skin and fat is removed from the lower abdomen following weight loss.

The panniculectomy, which is similar to a tummy tuck, was performed on a woman experiencing lower back pain. Removing the excess tissue would help alleviate the pain, Gabriel explained.

In the operating room, Gabriel used a marking pen to identify the portions of the woman's belly he planned to remove. He then picked up his scalpel and make the first incision, explaining to his visitors why he made the marks where he did. Watanabe and Taneda peeked over Gabriel's shoulder as he cut along the woman's stomach and removed nearly five pounds of skin and fat.

Occasionally, the surgeons would remove notebooks from their scrub jacket pockets and scribble down measurements or tips provided by Gabriel. They also used digital cameras to document various stages of the procedure.

"Every surgery is so exciting," Taneda said.

The surgeons had high praise for the efficiency of the hospital and the abilities of the operating staff. In Japan, only surgeons can put in sutures. Taneda was surprised and impressed to see the surgical assistants helping Gabriel with the procedure in the operating room.

"We are so very impressed," Watanabe said.

While Gabriel has had other surgeons observe him in surgery, he's never had visitors from outside the country. But before Watanabe and Taneda's trip had even ended, Gabriel was already trying to plan a return visit.

"I love teaching," Gabriel said. "When you teach, you have to actually think about what you're doing. You have to relearn everything."

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