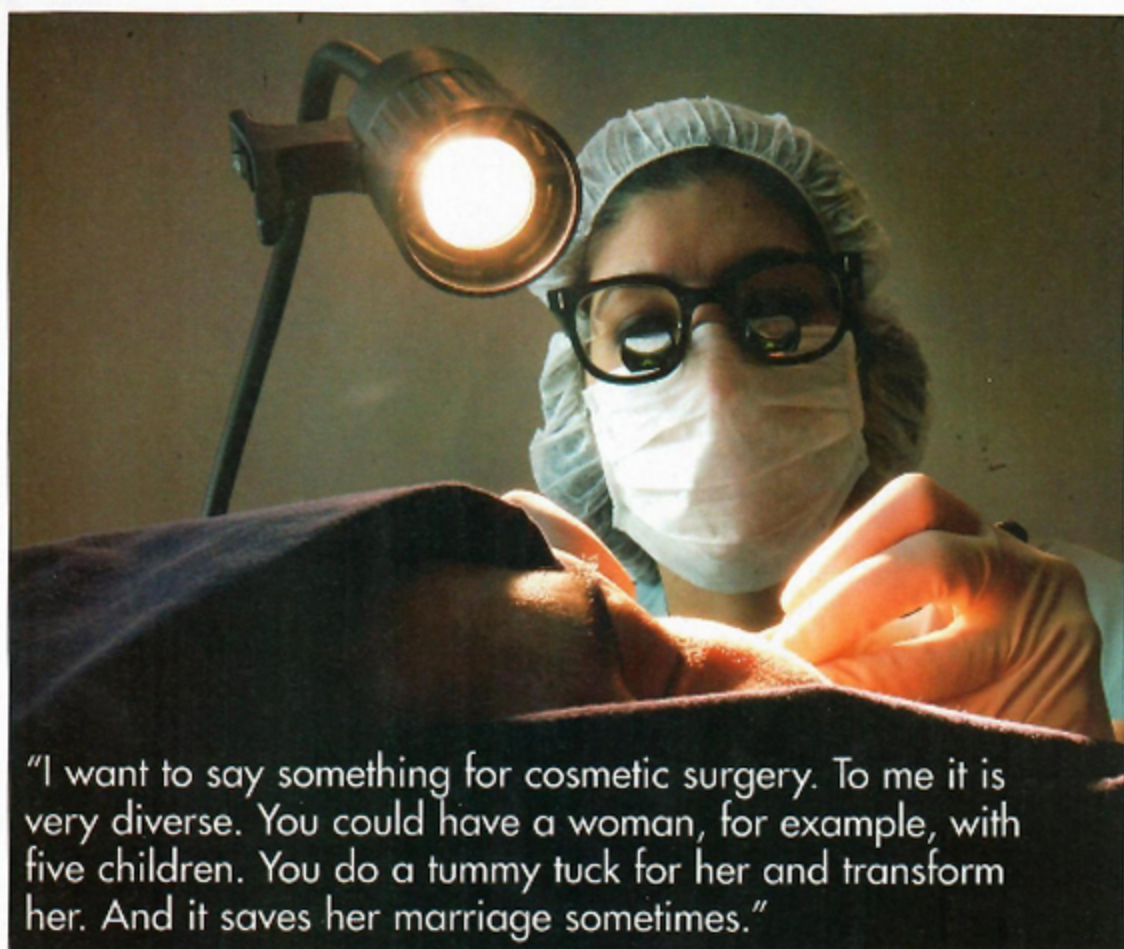


**Dr Buthainah Al-Shunnar talks of the challenges of being a plastic surgeon and the need to look beyond the wrinkles**

## BEYOND BEAUTY

### COVER STORY



"I want to say something for cosmetic surgery. To me it is very diverse. You could have a woman, for example, with five children. You do a tummy tuck for her and transform her. And it saves her marriage sometimes."

in the States, how you work and the results you produce matter. Ultimately results speak.

**Did you face prejudice in the West because you were from the Middle East?**

Again, I was surprised. It is extremely difficult to be accepted into Johns Hopkins. It is one of the best hospitals in medicine in the States. To accept a foreigner like me is almost zero per cent. So I have to be very thankful to them.

I have to say one thing for the American system. They are very fair. If you work hard and prove yourself, they will give you a chance.

**What about patients? Did they readily accept you?**

I never had a problem. I worked in private practice for three years, and I was in

the trauma centre. I never had a patient tell me, "I don't want you to operate on me."

It all depends upon how you present yourself. Patients can sense hesitation. They can also sense confidence. I think this is true for any field. Your confidence will be transmitted to your patients.

Especially with the media now, plastic surgery is under the scanner because it has become popular. The reality of it is, anything in medicine has complications. If you are very honest with your patients and spend more time with them and explain the positive as well as the negative aspects, they will accept you. I believe in staying connected with my patients.

**Prejudice need not always be overt. It can be subtle. Have you ever sensed it?**

It is like building a house. You might connect with one contractor instead of another. You might connect better with someone from your own country, for example.

I don't feel insecure. If a patient wants to go to someone else, I have no problems with that because it is also something to do with chemistry. If someone doesn't want me to operate on them, it's their choice.

Oftentimes, I have patients coming to me from other doctors as well.

**What kind of support have you received from your family?**

My family has been very supportive. We are a very big family full of doctors. We are very education-oriented. I left the country when I was 17. It was very, very difficult. No one ever made me feel guilty for being on my own or taking so long to

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train myself. I always knew that if I ever needed anything, I could always pick up the phone and call home.

You just learn to be independent and cope. When I first arrived in Baltimore, they showed us around the emergency room. I found out that all the windows were bulletproof because of the violence around.

Almost all my patients came because of gunshot wounds at the trauma centre. I knew that this was something I would have to adjust to.

In fact, I went to Johns Hopkins with the idea of doing a one-year position. But when I got there, I realised I could learn a lot. So I worked really hard and applied for the four-year programme. And my family encouraged me.

**What about support from the community to pursue this unusual career?**

The community feels very proud of me. Dubai is just emerging, and Emiratis are just beginning to make a mark and there are so few doctors in my field, so the community is even more proud of me. No one, however conservative, has ever told me I should sit at home.

One thing about Dubai is that compared to the West, it may be conservative, but it is not judgemental. You are allowed to do what you want to.

**Why did you decide to come back?**

I wanted to be with my family. And it's home.

**Do you miss the US and the freedom?**

Yes and no. I spent my youth in the US. I miss my colleagues and the work environment. I feel free here too. And it's nice to be back home.

**What about culture shock and reverse culture shock?**

Yes, I did experience culture shock when I went to the States. You carry a set of values with you. But I learnt to be comfortable in the West. Once you go through culture shock, you learn to be comfortable anywhere. You begin to identify how to adapt.

And when I came back, I had to adapt back to this life. There was a big difference between the UAE I had left and the one I came back to. The changes are both positive and negative. The skyline has

changed and things are more exciting. But things were more cohesive earlier. Families met more often. Now everyone is busy with their own lives.

**Do you feel bad that the UAE nationals are in a minority in your country, especially in the work place?**

You see, things will take time. This is an emerging society. What we have now is the fruit of the past. It will take time for it to reach its potential. Look at Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum's daughter. She has won a medal in martial arts. He is not only pushing his own children to succeed, but also the entire nation. We have the support of the rulers. What more can we ask for?

**How is it to work with expatriates?**

I'm used to it. I lived in the States for 10 years. So I'm used to working with foreigners. In fact, you should ask me what it is like to work with Arabs.

I think bonding is person-dependent, not necessarily nationality-dependent. You could have an American who is friendly, and another one who has a chip on their shoulder.

**How do you feel when you see expatriates dominating the scene?**

I have mixed feelings. I have to translate that experience with my experience in the States. I was an expatriate there, and I was given a fair chance like everybody else.

My philosophy is, you should be valued on the basis of your work ethics and your educational background and how hard and sincerely you work.

Having said that, I have mixed feelings when any culture takes advantage of their rights, to the point of not necessarily working as hard as they can because they can get away with it. This applies to nationals too.

If people are hired based on their merit, I don't have a problem with that. But if they are hired because they belong to a particular community, then it is bad. But this happens in a multicultural society. Everybody will only to hire their own, regardless of merit. This encourages a clannish attitude — a mafia-like environment. That's when I see a problem.

**What is your advice to Emirati women?**

Work hard and follow your dreams. It's yours if you want it. ☺

### COMMENDABLE CREDENTIALS

**D**r BUTHAINAH AL-SHUNNAR specialises in breast surgery, body contouring, aesthetic facial surgery, hand surgery, cancer reconstruction and microsurgery. She is a fellow of the American College of Surgeons and a member of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. She is also a member of the Johns Hopkins Medical and Surgical Association.

After graduating from medical college with honours from the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, Ireland in 1991, Dr Al-Shunnar received her five years of general surgery training at the prestigious Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore and George Washington University Hospital in Washington DC, where she was elected to the Alpha Omega Alpha national medical honour society. She then completed her plastic surgery training at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. She went on to work for three years in York, Pennsylvania, as Consultant Plastic Surgeon in private practice, also covering a major trauma centre for its reconstructive needs.



JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED: Dr Al-Shunnar with her mother