

Be the Change You Want to See

Croatian ophthalmologist Nikica Gabrić serves as an example to both his coworkers and his patients

Maja Boháč | 07/02/2019 | Opinion

At a Glance

- Nikica Gabrić opened his clinic in 1998 after serving as Head of the Ophthalmology Department at a university clinic and founding Croatia's first eye bank
- He has trained over 30 ophthalmologists, and opened the first private university clinic in the region
- Gabrić has had LASIK and had a multifocal IOL implanted during cataract surgery, which he believes helps him better understand the needs of his patients
- His clinic performs all ophthalmic procedures and participates in clinical studies and scientific projects.

There are some ophthalmologists who see their work as a solitary marathon, but there are also those who believe that, although one person might run faster than a whole team, the team can run a longer distance. Investing in people is a prerequisite of a good leader, and Croatian ophthalmologist Nikica Gabrić is a great example of someone who invests and believes in his team. As an ophthalmologist who has been trained by him – and as an ophthalmologist who works in one of his clinics, I can certainly attest to that.

Leading the pack

One of the most renowned and successful ophthalmologists in southeast Europe, Gabrić was Head of the Ophthalmology Department at one of Zagreb's university clinics and Head of the first Croatian eye bank, which he founded in 1994, when he decided to open his own clinic. The Svjetlost group started formally in 1998 – in an apartment with a single excimer laser and just one other ophthalmologist and two nurses completing the team.



Two decades later, the Svjetlost group has seven clinics in five different countries (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and a sister clinic in the Republic of North Macedonia) and over 200 employees, including 35 ophthalmologists and 21 ophthalmology residents who together perform over 10,000 surgeries a year. The group is the only chain of ophthalmic clinics in southeastern Europe.

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The young ophthalmic specialists working at the Svjetlost clinics, myself included, admit that it was Gabrić who made us fall in love with ophthalmology. His enthusiasm for continuous improvement and hard work spread among the next generation of clinicians, who did not need personal recommendations or money to start their residency – only a passion for learning and a good work ethic, which is quite unusual in the region.

When we met this natural-born leader, who would sit with us every evening after a 12-hour workday and talk about his love for ophthalmology, we began to share his dream.

As hard as the long days were, during our residency, we experienced immense growth as ophthalmologists and as people. Almost every clinician from the first residency group became a renowned surgeon and trained to be a leader in their field. The opening of new clinics meant that we could all find our place in the cities and countries of southeast Europe and train the next generation of ophthalmologists. So far, 30 specialists have been trained in Svjetlost – most of them starting straight after medical school – and the clinics are still educating future ophthalmic experts.



Taking center stage

Gabrić gladly talks about his first cataract surgery, performed in 1986 in the second month of his residency; the first PRK procedure in Croatia, which he performed in 1998; or the first multifocal IOL he implanted. He makes his residents feel like they are all capable of similar achievements. He was the youngest ophthalmology resident, the youngest surgeon, and the youngest head of clinic in Croatia when he and his team transformed the general hospital department into a clinical hospital.

He was the first clinician in the region to perform phaco surgery, when he began offering the procedure in 1992. These days, he is the only ophthalmologist there with a private university clinic. From its conception, Svjetlost has worked with the Croatian Ministry of Science on ocular immunology projects. It has also performed clinical studies for novel anti-VEGF treatments, new IOLs, and dry-eye medications.

The clinic has always aimed to answer all ophthalmic needs: from oculoplastics and strabismus surgeries, through corneal transplants, glaucoma and cataract surgery, and vitrectomies, to laser vision correction. Svjetlost collaborates with all the major players in the refractive field, from excimer and femtosecond laser providers to companies producing phakic and multifocal IOLs.



Practice what you preach

Gabrić firmly believes that a surgeon should have LASIK surgery – if needed – to better understand what it feels like for a patient; that's why he had his myopic astigmatism corrected with LASIK in 2005. He talked about it with such enthusiasm that seven of us decided to have LASIK and got rid of our glasses. And it really did make a huge difference to our patients, because we found it much easier to explain the procedure to them – which in turn resulted in an increased number of laser surgeries. Since then, we have performed over 50,000 refractive procedures on our patients.

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Twelve years later, a new era began: at the end of 2017, Gabrić received surgery for a cataract in his right eye and had an elongated depth of focus (EDOF) IOL implanted. The Svjetlost clinic was one of the sites used for the clinical investigation of the TECNIS Symphony lens from Johnson & Johnson Vision, and Gabrić wanted to see how the technology worked from a patient's point of view.

He was impressed with the technology and satisfied with the quality of visual performance of the new lens.

He is now 57 and has good vision at all distances again – something he considers very important for an ophthalmic surgeon. Within a year, the IOL was the most implanted lens in Croatia – patients wanted the lens that their doctor had chosen for himself. Of the 3,000 cataract patients operated at Svjetlost every year, 30 percent are implanted with multifocal IOLs. The rest of the team are not presbyopic yet, so we might have to wait a while before we follow in our mentor's footsteps!

Both Gabrić and his team believe that a successful ophthalmic practice results from hard work and cooperation within the team. Far-fetched dreams can be turned into ideas and plans, and then executed over the years. Clear focus, strong commitment, and youthful enthusiasm are what makes a business effective – and satisfied patients are the end result.