

Retail Detail: Patrice Benoit's Medicus

“Luminotherapy is fashionable right now,” says Patrice Benoit of Medicus orthopedic laboratory in Montreal. “See this here? The light will give you the same amount of sunshine that a person receives during the day in just 30 minutes – 10,000 lux. People that work at night, métro employees, a lot of artists, they come in and buy it.” There’s another light for sale that acts like an alarm clock: It simulates sunrise to help people wake up.

BY VANESSA MURI, THE GAZETTE FEBRUARY 4, 2011



“Luminotherapy is fashionable right now,” says Patrice Benoit of Medicus orthopedic laboratory in Montreal.

Photograph by: John Kenney, The Gazette

MONTREAL - Patrice Benoit is an experienced orthotist (specialist that deals with the assessment, evaluation, design and fabrication of splints and braces) and the branch manager of Medicus, an orthopedic laboratory and clinic specializing in custom-fit braces and prosthetics. Its repertoire also includes ergonomic products, allergen-free bedding and everything from support stockings to light therapy. 5050 St. Laurent Blvd., 514-276-3691. www.medicus.ca

So how did you end up as the manager of Medicus?

I've been the manager here for about 20 years, and I've been an orthotist for 12 years. At the time I started, they didn't really have schools for this kind of training. That started around 1986 at

Collège Montmorency in Laval. It's a three-year technical program, which includes prosthesis and orthotics. After three years there is a stage to complete; it's quite an intense program. But first I studied the arts.

Really? What brought about the switch?

While I was studying arts at university, I worked at Medicus to pay my bills. And I loved it here so much that I decided to stay. That might seem strange, but it's more relevant to art than you might originally think. It's similar because you have to take moulds, you use 3-D and you have to draw plans, so my background actually helped me a lot.

How many branches of Medicus are there?

Ten. And then there are external clinics at different hospitals. So, for example I go to Notre Dame hospital every two weeks. I will work clinics with the doctors there, I train with their residents, and I see their patients, especially for people who need a brace. Then we make the braces here.

So I'm guessing most of your clients don't walk in off the street?

That's right, they come with referrals from their doctors, physiotherapists, chiropractors ... all those specialists who need to have their patients fitted with something. Otherwise, people just walk by and come in because they see we have nice shoes. (Laughs) They are comfortable shoes! Medicus is associated with sick people, but in recent years, that's changed. You don't have to be sick to come here. If you want comfortable shoes that fit well, come here. If you do a lot of sports, we have many things for you. If you're an athlete, we can do biomechanical tests. We work with a lot of Olympic teams, the Montreal Canadiens ... You might see our products on TV, if someone is injured on a show ...

Oh, sounds fun.

We work a lot with Cirque du soleil. We do research into finding ways to reduce the impact that jumping has on people. We're working on something that fits inside their shoes. We do a ton of research and development, like 3-D technology for knee braces. Medicus was the first lab in the world to create those kinds of joints.

I'm feeling quite proud at the moment.

Yes, we won a lot of awards for that, from all over the world. And it came from Quebec. Not many people know that Montreal is a great research centre for orthopedic appliances. We are specialists in diabetic feet as well.

What does that mean, exactly?

A diabetic foot doesn't have sensation along the sole. It depends on the severity of the case, but lots of people don't feel anything at all. So they might hurt themselves, they could be bleeding, and if they don't know about an injury and it's left untreated, they could get gangrene. We can help with braces, special insoles, to alleviate pressure, to realign the feet.

Are the materials the same used in regular insoles?

No, that's the specialty of Medicus. Each disease has a different material associated with it. It's all custom-made; you won't just find this sitting on the shelf. It depends on your activities. If you're a lawyer and need something dressier, we can do that. You need a prescription. And this way you can get receipt for your insurance.

Actually, that was my next question. Does the government ever pay for these kinds of things under Medicare?

Good question. Not for the insoles but for specific braces, yes. They have very restricted conditions. You can see in our catalogue; the government covers anything with this pictogram. It has to be a strong prescription, made by a specialist. Neurologist, orthopedist, rheumatist, etc. But usually people do have insurance.

That makes sense.

At this branch of Medicus, we work on special breast prosthetics. So if you had surgery, we can find things here fitted for you. We have special bras, swimming suits, anything you might need. It gives people back their dignity.

That's so important.

We make special helmets for children who were born with small head deformities. We can realign the bones in the head and they will grow properly. If you go to the hospital, you have to wait six months. Here you have to pay, but you can get it in two weeks. A big part of our business is these special stockings for people who work standing up. You need a prescription for that as well if the strength level is higher than 20. They help with varicose veins, thrombosis. It depends how deep the veins are. And these days they're very fashionable; we have many different colours.

So you must have flight attendants stockpiling those?

Yes, oh yes. We do a lot of prevention as well. We go out and try to educate people, hand out brochures. We do workshops, we do company visits. So instead of employees coming here, we can go to (workplaces) and evaluate every employee for free.

Oh, really?

We go with a computer and an orthotist and we make appointments to see the employees. This way we can give information, do postural analysis, etc. We're the only company that does this. In one week we'll do all the Costcos.

So what would the business do with the information afterward?

It's a good way for us to showcase all the services we offer if someone needs them. For instance, not many people know we have an orthopedist on staff. Usually it takes a year to get an appointment; at Medicus, I can give you one in two weeks. It's good for older or less mobile people to know that we

offer so many turnkey services; they can have a series of appointments done in one day and get the results in two weeks.

That's certainly handy. Does the training program in Laval offer experience with all this during the program?

It's a great course. The first two years are very biomechanical, physiology, anatomy, etc. It's very similar to a nurse's training. Then students specialize afterwards. But, no, they won't know how to use all these materials when they graduate. Depending on the lab they join afterward, they will learn to use different materials. But they'll have a great base. This is a difficult program to get into; 500 people apply, only 25 to 30 get in. And at the end of the three years, maybe only 15 will graduate. It's very tough.

Wow.

I hire all the orthotists that graduate; put it that way. (Laughs)

I imagine there must be misconceptions in this industry, seeing as it's not very well known and so highly specialized ...

For sure. Most people go to a pharmacy, just buy these products straight off the shelf, assume they're all the same. But they are not really the best products to use. Sometimes, depending on your injury, for a short period of time, it will be OK, but they are not custom made. But it's better to be seen by someone, have an evaluation done. We don't want to carry the same products as the pharmacies; we want better ones. Good example is when people often assume that if you have a fracture, you go to the hospital and get a cast for six weeks. People don't know they can have a special brace instead that can be removed during your physio.

Are there any interesting trends that you've been observing in the industry?

Oh, yes! Luminotherapy is fashionable right now. See this here? The light will give you the same amount of sunshine that a person receives during the day in just 30 minutes – 10,000 lux. People that work at night, métro employees, a lot of artists; they come in and buy it.

Boy, I could go for that right now.

It works! Some people that used to use medication for mild depression don't need it anymore. And there are no side effects, either, which is great. There's another light that acts like an alarm clock. It simulates sunrise to help you wake up. And sunset to help you fall asleep.

That sounds ideal. What other things do you have that work for everyone?

We have shoes, nice shoes, and so many different styles. There's a misconception that orthopedic shoes are ugly. Times have changed. We only order shoes where the insoles can be taken out, so that we can make custom ones. We have different widths, different weights. If you want something really light, buy Ara. It doesn't weigh anything! And you don't need a prescription to buy these; You can just walk in. Have you heard of Sano? These are the new generations of shoe, with the centre of gravity in the middle. You do exercises every time you wear them, because you're always rolling. It's good for

balance and stability. It makes you hold in your abdominals. It's so popular in the States and Europe. We've had them for a year and it's been crazy.

But does this really help you lose weight? Don't Reebok and Nike have something like this?

They all copied these from Sano, but they're not the same. These are great. We have sandals, boots, sports shoes, everything. And we can remake the shoe to fit your feet if that's what you need. This sewing machine is 70 years old; they don't make them like this anymore.

Gosh, it's beautiful. And it's in such good shape.

Yes, they are incredibly durable.

How did you find it?

Oh, we bought this when Medicus first opened. We've never used another one.

Is there an illness or an injury that you see most often?

Arthritis. This is the 21st century disease, I think. That and diabetes. There are so many children that are diabetic now, getting the disease at a young age. They're overweight; it's very sad. We also see seasonal injuries as well. Right now, we're looking at a lot of ski accidents.

I can imagine. (Looking at signed photographs along the wall.) And you've got quite a wall of fame going on here ...

Yes, these are some of the celebrities that we have worked with over the years. Many are athletes, there are singers, bands, you name it. We are proud of the work we do.

This interview has been condensed. Comments?

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