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Put the knives in the drawer

LORNA MACLAREN

September 26 2005

AVRIL Mackenzie would not contemplate having a facelift. The very idea of going under the knife makes her shudder. Yet she is still looking to improve her appearance and has opted for a non-surgical way of doing it, as have a growing number of people. Fears over hospital infections, unnatural post-op results or a painful recovery period have prompted many to turn away from the scalpel to a new generation of pills, potions and lotions claiming to offer the same rewards of smooth skin and jowl-free complexions. Dozens of the most popular science-based beauty products are marketed as "natural" or "herbal". In the thorny world of cosmetic procedures, some men and women see these alternatives as a more wholesome way of staving off the march of time. In a culture where the boundary between the way we look physically and the way we feel emotionally is indistinct, the makeover industry is booming.

Mackenzie, 52, opted for an American treatment called Sculptra, dubbed the liquid facelift. A substance was injected into the skin on her face to fill out lines and wrinkles while stimulating the deeper skin layers to produce more cells, plumping up the surface for up to two years. It costs £400 a treatment.

"I didn't do this to appear younger," Mackenzie, from Glasgow, insists. "I liked the idea of looking fresher but certainly not nipped and tucked as you see with some Hollywood actresses. Surgery is too expensive and frightening for me. I've never really found skin creams that work, so I gave this a try."

Mackenzie, who has two grown-up children, claims people have since stopped her in the street to say how well she is looking.

"In the past few weeks it has softened any lines around my mouth and generally smoothed out my skin. It has been a real confidence booster."

But surely it's no bad thing to have the natural lines that come with age?

"Of course not, but people use make-up to appear a certain way. My treatment was just an extension of that," she says. "I still wanted to look like me, but a more rested me." Treatments such as Sculptra are increasingly popular as an alternative to surgery. It was the administration of Botox – a nerve toxin with the ability to freeze the muscles that create wrinkles – that opened the doors to injectable products and made them widely acceptable as a beauty-parlour treatment.

Face creams have always been major players in the quest for youthfulness but new batches of lotions have come on the market which sell themselves as an alternative to surgery or Botox. Again, most claim to contain only natural ingredients, ranging from deep-sea minerals to sheep placenta. There is usually little scientific evidence to back their manufacturers' promises of turning back the years.

Skin Elements, an Australian company, has developed Natralox cream. It claims to reduce the appearance of wrinkles by up to 50% in 30 days. Estée Lauder has another top-of-the-league cream which arrived at beauty counters last month – Re-Nutriv Re-Creation is a day-and-night cream pack that costs around £450. It contains ingredients including 4000-year-old deep-sea water from Hawaii and minerals from Okinawa in Japan.

The alternatives out there don't stop at skin boosters, however. There are even concoctions available which claim to inflate bustlines. Holland and Barratt is getting in on the act by selling pills that promise to increase bust size the "natural way".

Breast Gro is made in the Netherlands and costs £49.99 for 160 tablets. The blurb claims it naturally makes breasts swell by as much as two cup sizes through its plant-based ingredients. Other herbal products available on the internet include pills called Quick Bust and Femenique. But can they work?

Professor Alan Crozier, an expert in plant biochemistry at Glasgow University's institute of biomedical and life science, is dubious. He says: "The idea that women can take pills and get a bigger bosom doesn't seem likely to me at all."

"Plant oestrogens are found in foods containing soya and there is no evidence that women from cultures with a soya-rich diet have larger breasts than women from any other culture. I'd say this is a nonsense."

Iain Mackay is a consultant plastic surgeon based at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. Of the face creams and filler injection treatments, he says: "It may sound strange coming from someone in my profession, but I think there is an important place for some beauty treatments, if they satisfy customers enough to stop them having surgery. To me, the fewer people opting for cosmetic surgery, the better. It's not a miracle-worker and doesn't

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"As an alternative, I've found that the injectable fillers work very well to improve the appearance of the skin by softening lines and plumping up the natural grooves between the nose and mouth – but they don't tend to recreate the lifting effect of surgery. Face creams containing fruit acids or exfoliators can greatly improve the surface of the skin but, again, can't turn back time.

Mackay adds that if consumers have realistic expectations then they shouldn't be too disappointed with the results. "Don't believe everything you read," he warns. "If you are aged 45, not even surgery can make you look 25. Pills won't give you a big bust, only surgery will do that. You can't make wrinkles vanish with a cream and there is no such thing as permanent hair removal."

Eileen Kapadohas, 46, owns the Velvet beauty clinic in the Clarkston area of Glasgow along with Hazel Scott. The qualified nurse carries out various beauty treatments including filler injections on clients.

She says most of her clients would rather not go as far as surgery. "Our liquid facelift and other products do offer a good alternative but we speak to clients individually before deciding what suits who," she says. "We don't promise people the moon as results depend on skin condition and good genetics – but generally we do have wonderful feedback."

Kapadohas blames the trend for magnifying make-up mirrors for a lot of skin paranoia: "I tell women to throw these things out as they show the skin in far too much detail. No-one would look at you that closely.

"Our customers are satisfied with Botox, fillers and facial peels rather than full surgery. They want to look as though they've had a long, relaxing holiday rather than anything overly dramatic. Finally, it's important if someone is going to administer injections to make sure they are qualified. We have a GP who does our Botox for us. Always be safe."

One woman who admits she is addicted to the beauty myth is Angela, 36, from East Kilbride. She refuses to be fully identified as she prefers to hide her treatments from friends and family.

"I spend hundreds of pounds on fillers and Botox," she says. "I have the kind of job where I must create a good impression and feel looking my best is vital to how I'm perceived. I must admit it has become something of an obsession but I justify it to myself by saying that buying treatments is similar to buying clothes. What's the point of being slim and fit if your face doesn't match up?"

She adds: "I think thirtysomethings and older people these days look better than they ever did before – men and women. I have male pals who have had Botox. It's getting to the stage that if you don't have something done, you'll be left behind.

"I'd be too scared to get facial surgery, though, in case it looks unnatural. Cosmetic procedures are still frowned upon by a lot of people, so most who get it keep it to themselves, as I do."

Avril Mackenzie felt no pressure to undergo the Sculptra treatment and she'll be going back for more. She says: "My son couldn't care less and my daughter just said it looked good, but I think my skin appears smoother and I feel more confident."