

New Ways of Smoothing Things Over

Injected toxins paralyze brow, killing wrinkles before they start

BY MARY ROACH

Health Magazine

It was a day like any other, except that around 2 p.m. I went to get a syringe of the world's deadliest nerve poison injected into my face.

You mess around with neurotoxin, you want to have a pretty good reason. You bet I do. It goes like this: I'm noticing ugly little lines between my eyebrows, and they bug me. They make me look older. Of course, I am older. I'm 34, and I used to be 21. One day they will come up with a way to remedy this, but in the meantime there is botulinum toxin.

This is, yes, the toxin that causes botulism. It blocks receptors on muscles, thereby cutting off signals from the brain. In amounts such as those found in a can of contaminated vichyssoise, the effect is generalized paralysis. Unable to move your diaphragm muscle, you can't breathe, and soon you are dead. In tiny amounts, such as those about to be found in my forehead, it causes localized paralysis. Unable to move your corrugator muscle, you can't knit your brow, and soon you are beautiful.

Los Angeles plastic surgeon William J. Binder, 46, is a pioneer of the botulinum toxin treatment "for purposes of vanity." (It's long been used for neuromuscular disorders such as tics and crossed eyes.) The pamphlet Binder sent me, called "Botox — A New Treatment That Eliminates Wrinkles," informs me that Botox is safe (9,000 injections, no complications) and that its effects last three to six months.

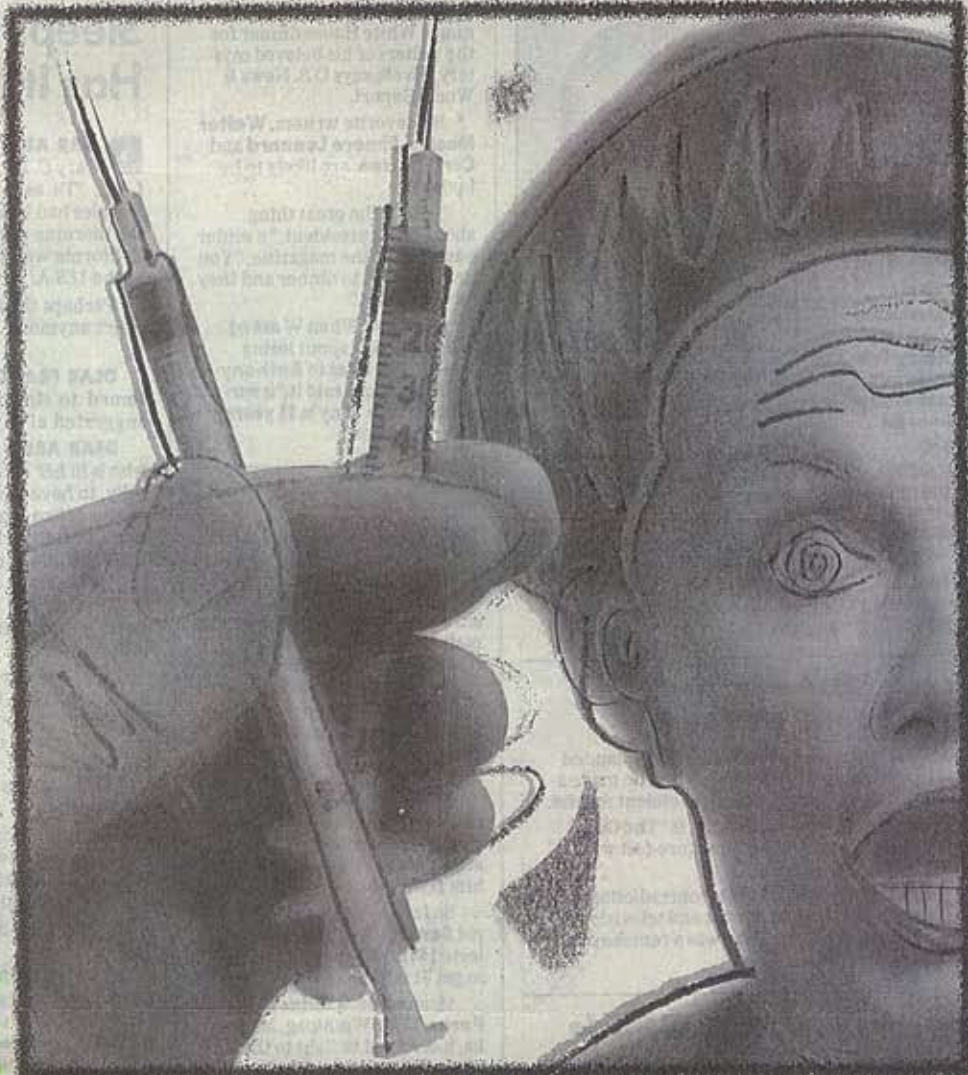
Two-Year Study

Binder and several colleagues at Columbia University Medical Center recently finished a two-year study to pinpoint optimum doses and refine technique. Getting the dosage right is important because if too much toxin is injected, surrounding muscles could be affected, resulting, for instance, in droopy eyelids.

As it turns out, Botox eliminates wrinkly expressions — furrows, squints, puckered brows. It does not eliminate the permanent creases that these expressions eventually cause. Botox helps prevent these wrinkles from forming, but once they're there, it won't get rid of them. For that, you need a "filler substance," such as injectable collagen or fat. (Collagen is purified, goopified cow skin; fat is thigh jiggle — your own, "harvested" via liposuction.)

For example, the 61-year-old owner of the gold lame open-toe platforms is getting collagen because Botox wasn't around 30 years ago, and she has developed deep frown lines. The 38-year-old actress is getting Botox because she lives in fear of looking like the 61-year-old (who actually looks 49). "Here in L.A.," she confided, "it's the kiss of death to be over 19." She is also fond of Botox because she frowns easily and doesn't like the way it makes her look. "Before Botox it was like, I'm thinking about my grocery list and I look like I'm planning a murder."

Dr. Binder calls me in. Wil-



BY ED RACHLES/THE CHRONICLE

The newest wrinkles in the skin trade

Skin wrinkles where it's folded. The more often you crease it, the sooner and deeper it lines.

Although everything from dragging on a cigarette to sleeping on your side may play a part, the main perpetrators are facial expressions. Smiling and laughing etch lines around the mouth and the corners of the eyes; fretting and frowning score the brow.

As skin ages, it loses resiliency, and expression lines become permanent fixtures. Sun exposure hastens the process. It also contributes to wrinkles indirectly, as squinting causes fine lines below the eyes and along the brow. Sun changes the skin's overall texture as well, creating a leathery network of microscopic crosshatches.

Such fine lines and sun-coarsened skin can be treated with chemical peels or dermabrasion, but deeper lines and furrows must be filled in. You putty the cracks rather than plane the board. Here's how:

Botox

Botox is a nerve toxin injected under the skin in the forehead or crow's-foot area that temporarily deadens the facial muscles and makes it impossible to wrinkle up skin.

It's best for vertical frown lines, brow furrows and crow's feet. It usually lasts three to six months. It costs from \$300 to \$700 per visit.

Advantages: No recovery time or side effects. May prevent further development of wrinkles. Fast and relatively painless.

Disadvantages: Doesn't get rid of existing wrinkles.

Collagen

Collagen is purified cow protein injected into the skin's second layer, the dermis, to supplement its natural collagen and fill out creases.

It's best for acne scars, nose-to-mouth folds, vertical frown lines, brow furrows and "marionette lines" — vertical lines at the corners of the mouth. It usually lasts three to six months. It costs \$225 to \$1,800 depending on the size of the area filled in (charge is per number of vials used).

Advantages: Minor after-effects such as redness and swelling.

Disadvantages: Chance of intermittent swelling, lumpiness or white patches. One percent to 2 percent of patients develop allergic reactions. Collagen patients have a higher incidence of certain autoimmune disorders, though cases are rare and a causal link hasn't been proved.

Fat Transplants

Fat removed by syringe from a patient's thigh, buttocks or abdomen is injected into the subcutaneous fat layer beneath sunken or creased skin to plump it up. It's best for laugh lines, scars, forehead lines, dimples, lip augmentation, sunken cheeks, deep folds. It usually lasts three to six months. It costs from \$500 to \$1,500 depending on the site.

Advantages: No chance of allergic reaction.

Disadvantages: Bruising and swelling for several days. Both fat extraction and injection are painful and require anesthetic. Site is initially overfilled, making skin look lumpy for a few weeks.

Gore-Tex

Tiny strips of the fabric are threaded into subcutaneous fat beneath wrinkles to plump them up. It's best for any deep wrinkles (also lip augmentation). It is permanent. It costs \$500 to \$1,500 per area.

Advantages: Effect is permanent.

Disadvantages: Very new; not widely available.

HEALTH MAGAZINE

liam Binder is the sort of guy you like right away. He has long, deep, wonderful laugh lines, and when he talks he raises his eyebrows way up high so his forehead looks like the fretboard of a

12-string guitar. He doesn't get Botox injections.

His nurse has absolutely no lines at all. She's 28. I ask her if she's been getting Botox injections. "They all do," says Binder.

"The staff gets the leftovers." Botox doesn't keep. Like champagne, once it's opened, you have to finish it off.

Binder reads the syringe. "So." I'm stalling. "What would

happen if you tripped and fell and on the way down the syringe got stuck in my stomach?"

"Nothing," says Binder. "You have to realize, when you talk about botulism, you're talking about ingesting zillions of bacteria that continue to live inside you and produce more toxin." He's giving me 15 units of pure toxin sans the bacteria. It takes 3,000 to 30,000 units to cause symptoms of botulism. "For people with torticollis (neck contractions), they're using 200 units." He picks up the needle. "This is just playing."

For the record, the injections — three of them, in my case — are no more painful than an immunization. Here is what hurts: One session costs \$300 to \$700 per site. And, as with collagen or fat injections, you need to come back several times a year.

Brow Lifts

I ask Binder if there are any permanent treatments for frown and worry lines. He says, "brow lift." That entails making an incision across the top of the head, peeling back the scalp and forehead and flipping them down over the eyes, snipping the frown muscles, putting the scalp back up, and pulling the forehead taut.

"And then there's Gore-Tex," Binder says. This is new. Millimeter-thick strips of medical-grade parka fabric are cut to fit and are threaded through the fat beneath a wrinkle to plump it out. In addition to being waterproof and breathable, Gore-Tex also happens to be exceptionally nonreactive.

Binder is eyeing the area above my mouth where many people have an upper lip. "Gore-Tex is great for lips. We can pump lips up permanently! What do you think about that?"

I think it's time to go home now.

Three days later. The strangest thing about not being able to pucker your brow is that it doesn't feel at all strange. It's an absence of feeling, but not a numbness. Allow me to demonstrate. When I say Go, try as hard as you can to crinkle the skin on your forehead. Ready? Go. Now you know what Botox is like.

No One Noticed

As for what it's done for my appearance, it's hard to say. I imagine I look more friendly and relaxed, but no one's mentioned it. One thing that has changed dramatically is the amount of time I spend noticing how often other people pucker their brows when they talk and how much older it makes them look. I also spend more time inspecting my reflection in store windows, as I used to scrunch my brow in bright sunlight, and it's kind of neat that I don't.

That's about it. The little lines that were there before are still there. Though Botox would, over time, keep them from getting deeper, I can't imagine going for injections every few months for the next 30 years. Perhaps if the cost were closer to that of a perm or an overpriced wrinkle elixir, I'd feel differently.

Over lunch, I ask an acquaintance what she thinks. "A thousand smackers a year? For that kind of money, you could fix the bags under your eyes. Or get liposuction under your chin — or down here, where you're starting to get jowls..."

I'm planning a murder, and it looks as if I'm thinking about my grocery list.

Universal Press Syndicate