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The disturbing world of Back-street Botox

by CLAIRE COLEMAN - 22nd July 2007

Practitioners with no medical training, drugs bought over the internet and disfiguring results. Worse still, it's all legal

When Bonnie Kaplan wanted to hide a few wrinkles, she thought nothing of visiting a private clinic for a couple of shots of Botox.

"I'm 53, I've got wrinkles. I wanted to get rid of them," she says. "All my friends were doing it."

She had no idea that the doctor treating her would be an osteopath who had been struck off, nor that rather than using Botox, he would inject her with a diluted form of Botulinum toxin, the highly poisonous substance from which Botox is derived, that was intended for lab research rather than use on humans.



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The consequences were horrific. Thirty-six hours after the injections, Bonnie started to have problems breathing and was so weak she couldn't walk.

She was rushed to hospital and, as botulism set in, her nerves were damaged. Within hours, her whole body was paralysed.

Doctors think she may have received up to 2,500 times the amount of toxin believed to be lethal if injected into the bloodstream.

After spending months in hospital, breathing with the help of a ventilator and unable to speak, Bonnie was eventually able to move around in a wheelchair, but doctors warned that the possibility of a full recovery was slim and could take years.

She wasn't the only one affected. Her husband, Eric, 52, was injected with the same deadly toxin, and, bizarrely, the doctor, Bach McComb, 47, had also injected himself and his girlfriend, Alma Hall, 34.

All three ended up being hospitalised like Bonnie. While this shocking incident took place in Florida, Lifestyle has discovered that the terrifying lack of regulation in the injectables industry in Britain means it could easily happen here.

Every year, thousands of people are seduced by the prospect of a beauty boost and don't think twice about popping out for a quick shot.

The most popular procedures are: Botox, injected into the face to relax muscles and so prevent wrinkles forming; and fillers, substances based on hyaluronic acid or collagen, which occur naturally in the body and help plump up sagging skin, making it appear firmer and less wrinkled.

Little thought seems to be given to what might happen if something goes wrong.

After all, in recent years Botox, Restylane, Perlane, Sculptra, fillers and injectables have become as much a part of our beauty vocabulary as foundation, lipstick and mascara.

If you want an example of quite how accessible, and acceptable, this sort of non-invasive cosmetic enhancement has become, look no further than the latest Grattan catalogue.

It has started selling appointments for Botox injections and lip enhancement alongside lacy lingerie and Le Creuset kitchenware.



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But, unlike lipstick and mascara, these increasingly commonplace beauty treatments are serious medical procedures, with serious risks attached, as Bonnie found out to her cost.

You'd hope that this would mean that anyone injecting Botox or fillers would be just as strictly regulated as your local GP or surgeon.

This is not the case. In 2005, the Government acknowledged that, in the wrong hands, Botox and other injectable procedures put patients at risk of permanent injury, including transmission of hepatitis and vCJD.

But, two years on, there are still no official controls in place and the industry has been asked to regulate itself.

The shocking upshot is that pretty much anyone can stick a needle full of Botox or filler into your face.

While Botox is a prescription drug that can be obtained only by a doctor, anyone is allowed to inject it "under the guidance of a doctor".

Industry insiders say they're aware that there are instances of doctors bulk ordering the drug and then passing it on to unqualified people to use.

And, when it comes to fillers, the news is even more worrying. As they aren't considered to be medicines, they don't need a prescription.

That means the only thing stopping every Tom, Dick and Harry buying the stuff is the hope that the manufacturers of these products will sell them only to medical professionals.

A spokesperson for Q-Med, the firm behind Restylane - a filler that is injected into the skin to plump out wrinkles or sunken areas of the face - confirmed they sell their products only to registered nurses, doctors and dentists who provide proof of their qualifications.

However, in a hugely competitive market, it's naive to expect that every business would exercise such stringent controls over their customers.

If I decided to set up a salon offering Botox and filler shots to the public at £150 a time, all I need to do is find a doctor prepared to give or sell me Botox and show me how to inject it, and a company willing to sell me dermal fillers.

Then, despite the fact I have absolutely no medical training, I would be acting within the law.

But even if I couldn't find an accommodating doctor or willing filler manufacturer, the widespread availability of Botox and other injectable products on the internet means that I could get my hands on pretty much anything I needed.

In April, a Daily Mail investigation revealed how easy it was to buy Botox and LipoStabil, a fat-dissolving compound administered by injection, over the internet.

And a quick web search shows that Restylane and similar hyaluronic acidbased fillers can be bought with a credit card and just a few clicks of the mouse.

Who is to know whether these products are the real thing or counterfeit and likely to cause serious damage, even if administered by trained professionals?

This might sound far fetched, but as the popularity of these treatments grows, more people are looking to make a quick buck with scant regard for safety.

In February, at the Professional Beauty show in London, a company called Skintechniques were advertising dermal filler courses for beauty therapists.

The company's website boasts that they offer "the only insured beauty therapist course for injecting dermal filler" and explains that the course is a "one-on-one training day for beauty therapists NVQ level 3 or equivalent with a leading facial aesthetician for hyaluronic injections".

Industry insiders claim the course involves at best half a day of training, with the main focus on how to market your salon or spa.

Moreover, the "leading facial aesthetician" is James McGrath, a former mental health nurse who in 1998 set up Collagenics, a non-surgical beauty clinic, after practising Botox techniques on his wife Stephanie in their kitchen.

The McGraths have since separated and Collagenics is at pains to point out they are not affiliated with nor do they condone the work of Skintech-niques.

McGrath's one-day training costs £2,500 plus VAT, of which £500 goes towards the beautician's annual insurance, which gives them £ 1/2 million worth of medical indemnity insurance.

So, should the girl who does your nails decide she wants a bit of extra cash, there's nothing to stop her signing up for a course on Tuesday and injecting you with a filler on Wednesday.

And because dermal fillers are not considered drugs, they're not even subject to the, albeit rather woolly, legislation that governs Botox.

Essentially what McGrath is doing may be unethical, but it is legal.

It goes without saying that the more responsible side of the aesthetic beauty industry is horrified by this.

In May, the British Association of Cosmetic Doctors (BACD) urged beauty therapists to beware of such courses.

It believes they exploit beauticians who may be unaware of the risks involved in injecting dermal fillers without medical knowledge.

"Dermal fillers are perfectly safe when administered by a qualified doctor with an in-depth understanding of facial anatomy," says BACD chairman, John Curran.

"But it is not adequate to blindly stick a needle in someone's face with scant knowledge of the potential risks that can include facial necrosis or disfigurement.

"If dermal fillers are administered in a spa or hairdressing salon without medical supervision, how is a beauty therapist to deal with complications such as anaphylactic shock [an extreme and life-threatening allergic reaction], without resuscitation equipment?

"We must protect therapists and the public from this alarming development."

Backing his comments are the results of a BACD survey, which found that more than half of their 250-plus members have treated patients who had experienced complications at the hands of inexperienced or incompetent therapists.

Some will argue that as the effects of Botox and fillers are only short-term, however badly they are injected, any problems will be reversed in a few months. Not so, claim experts.

"For a start, however small the risk, you've got to bear in mind that whatever happens, it's on your face," says Rajiv Grover, a Harley Street plastic surgeon, who has had to treat a number of patients who have suffered at the hands of rogue practitioners.

"You can't just put a jumper on and cover it up, so what are you going to do? Not go out for four months?"

Andrew Vallance-Owen, Bupa medical director and chairman of the working group on cosmetic surgery established to implement self-regulation of the clinics, warns there are real dangers.

"With a semi-permanent filler, the results aren't simply going to be reversed in a couple of months.

"Furthermore, if injections are being administered in beauty parlours, there's also the health and safety aspect to consider when it comes to how hygienic and sterile the environment is.

"Though there's a possibility that injecting into the wrong place could damage a nerve, the biggest problems arise from infection.

"If the injected area becomes infected that can lead to abscesses which can result in permanent scarring.

"They might not be life-threatening, but they could be problems for life."

So how do you find someone qualified?

"If you want to be certain you're in the right hands, look for someone who is a member of the British Association for Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS) or a member of the British Association of Cosmetic Doctors (BACD)," says Rajiv Grover.

"If they are, you know they are registered with the GMC, have qualifications and insurance."

*BACD: 0800 328 3613; www.cosmeticdoctors.co.uk BAAPS: 020 7405 2234;
www.baaps.co.uk*