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Facial acupuncture growing

A procedure requiring a few pins in the face is gaining popularity as an alternative to Botox injections and cosmetic surgery.

BY MICHAEL HILL

ALBANY, N.Y. - Associated Press

Paula Scardamalia has pins in her face -- nine tiny ones angling out near her eyes, mouth and jaw.

The pins were poked in to tighten chin skin and erase lines on the 52-year-old woman's face. The practice, called facial acupuncture, is becoming popular as a sort of holistic alternative to trying to turn back time through toxins or surgery.

"This has got to be healthier than Botox or a surgical face-lift," said Scardamalia, the little needles wagging slightly.

Interest in facial acupuncture might be connected to the rising popularity of alternative medicine, or to society's obsession with youth and beauty, or to the mass of aging baby boomers. Whatever the reason, acupuncturists report a wave of interest in the ancient Chinese practice.

"It's very hot," said Mary Elizabeth Wakefield, a New York City practitioner whose facial work now consumes about three-quarters of her practice.

Acupuncturists typically stimulate selected points on the body with hair-thin pins to promote good health and alleviate pain. They view it as correcting energy imbalances along the body's "meridians," which carry an energy flow called Qi (pronounced "chee") -- a concept many mainstream physicians say lacks scientific evidence.

In facial acupuncture, needles are usually stuck in wrinkles and sags to bring more blood, Qi and muscle tone to an area. The theory, in a nutshell, is that a healthy face is a better-looking face.

Some practitioners advertise the process as an "acupuncture face-lift," though more tradition-minded practitioners blanch at the term. Wakefield says that's an improper label for what amounts to an organic healing process .

Marion Bergan, the licensed acupuncturist who treated Scardamalia for a demonstration, offers "facial rejuvenation acupuncture" in addition to her medical acupuncture. The 90-minute procedure includes an herbal face mask, a massage and a mild electrical stimulation. But the underpinning, so to speak, remains acupuncture.

Most of Bergan's facial customers are women in their 50s and 60s. But Wakefield said her practice gets a fair share of men, too.

"They realize in order to keep their jobs and to get jobs, they need to look younger," Wakefield said.

Patients who get over any aversion to having needles stuck in their face find out it doesn't hurt, at least not much.

Mary O'Connell, a 60-year-old treated by Bergan last year, said she noticed a tighter face after her sixth of 10 weekly treatments. "It didn't put me back to age 16," she said. "What it did do is take out the heavy, deep, deep lines around my cheeks and mouth and has sort of eliminated the drawn, tired look."

Ten treatments ran O'Connell about \$1,300. That's cheaper than a face-lift. A treatment with Botox, the wrinkle-smoothing agent derived from the toxin that causes botulism, can cost around \$400.

While millions of Americans have had acupuncture treatments, the practice has never been fully embraced by the American medical establishment. The American Medical Association has no position on it.