

A new outlook: A permanent alternative for alopecia sufferers

By E.T. Robbins / News Correspondent

Tuesday, June 8, 2004

After a couple of visits to Angelbare Permanent Cosmetics in Newton, Janice Burliss says she feels "fixed."

No, the Boxboro woman wasn't "broken" in the traditional sense. But up until a few weeks ago, she had been missing something: her eyebrows.

Since 1998, Burliss has been suffering from alopecia areata, AA, an autoimmune disease resulting in hair loss on the scalp and elsewhere on the body, including eyebrows and eyelashes.

According to the National Alopecia Areata Foundation Web site, "The affected hair follicles are mistakenly attacked in groups by a person's own immune system (white blood cells), resulting in the arrest of the hair growth stage. The disease affects 1.7 percent of the population overall, including more than 4.7 million people in the United States alone."

AA affects men and women of all ages and races, but it often occurs in childhood. Hair may or may not grow back. There is no known cure, but there are a variety of treatments from cortisone injections to the topical medicine minoxidil, that is contained in the hair stimulant Rogaine, that may or may not be effective.

While the disease is unpredictable, the NAAF notes that it's not life-threatening, but rather "life-altering" and often "psychologically devastating," especially for children.

Burliss, who is 49, was able to live with the disease for several years. She had patches of hair loss on her scalp that she could cover up with the rest of her hair. She received Kenalog injections, a type of steroid, from her dermatologist, which kept the disease "under control."

But in the fall of 2003, everything changed.

Burliss says, "I lost all my eyebrows very fast. The spots on my head started to become bigger and bigger, and then I had an overall thinning as well."

Burliss' dermatologist told her that there was nothing more that he could do. Undeterred, she saw a specialist in Boston who pointed out that the longer she went without hair, the less likely it would grow back. Burliss said she felt self-conscious, but wasn't about to give up hope.

"I knew I had to do something. I'm not the kind of person who sits back and does nothing when something like this happens. I'm sort of a proactive person."

The "something" came a couple of months ago in the form of a TV segment on permanent cosmetics and Shahla Whitmore, owner of Angelbare. While the program didn't address people with medical conditions like AA, it showed how people could get "permanent" eyebrows, eyeliner and even lipstick.

Burliss says, "I was so excited. I called her (Whitmore) the next day and said, 'I have no eyebrows. Can you help me?'"

The answer was yes.

Permanent cosmetics, also known as micropigmentation, has been used in many states throughout the

country, but was only recently legalized in Massachusetts along with several other forms of body art in 2001. Whitmore says the procedure has been used by plastic surgeons for years to hide scars from surgery, stretch marks and even burns.

"It's a version of tattooing, but it's not completely tattooing with the difference in the needles and the pigment and the machine," Whitmore says.

In addition to helping AA patients, Whitmore has had success with cancer patients who've lost eyebrows and who want the areolas on their reconstructed breasts to look more natural.

According to the American Academy of Micropigmentation, AAM, permanent cosmetic makeup involves implanting color into the layer of the skin known as the dermis. Whitmore, who was certified as a permanent cosmetics instructor by the AAM in 2002, has tattooed eyebrows, or a combination of eyebrows and eyeliner, on over 160 AA sufferers and has worked with over 800 permanent cosmetic clients in general.

But is it safe? Dr. Charles S. Zwerling, founder of the AAM and a leading researcher in micropigmentation, points out that while the FDA hasn't approved any pigment for permanent makeup, that doesn't mean certain pigments aren't safe and effective.

Zwerling says, "The FDA is primarily interested in medical therapies, not cosmetic ones. I think some pigment is safe and I think some is potentially very harmful. I've been doing this now for 20 years. The fact is this: inorganic iron oxide, titanium dioxide -- those two particular inorganic minerals are extremely safe. They've been used for many, many, hundreds and hundreds of years without complications."

Zwerling says he's done extensive research in medical literature and has found only three references of possible allergic reactions to inorganic iron oxide and titanium dioxide. In order to be safe, the AAM requires its members to perform allergy tests on patients. Zwerling also encourages consumers to make sure their practitioners are board certified with the AAM.

"There's no other place that does testing on a national basis except us. So at least you have some form of quality assurance that the practitioner is competent. I'm not saying they're necessarily good, but they are competent. They've done the courses. They've done the training. They've been examined by their peers, so you feel a little bit more security than going to maybe somebody who's done a home study course, which, unfortunately, is out there."

Whitmore only uses iron oxide-based pigments. The treatment involves two to three sessions, including an initial consultation during which Whitmore plays an informational video and tests the patient's skin for an allergic reaction to the pigment. Whitmore then discusses the "look" of the procedure and helps clients select the right of pigment. Finally, Whitmore snaps a few "before" pictures.

The actual procedure takes place on the next visit. A subsequent visit may be necessary to "touch-up" the tattooed area. Eyebrow treatments range in cost from \$370 to \$450, and the color lasts anywhere from 5 to 10 years.

And what if the eyebrows grow back?

Because Whitmore puts the eyebrows where they used to grow, any hair that grows back won't pose a problem.

Whitmore says, "It makes them more natural-looking."

As for how the treatment feels, Burliss says, "It's not painless, but it goes by fast." Burliss adds that the results are worth any discomfort.

"I was so, so grateful and so thrilled with the way they came out. I don't even think about my eyebrows anymore."

Burliss didn't stop there. Burliss lost her lower eyelashes due to AA, so she had eyeliner permanently tattooed to her lower eyelid as well. Whitmore also referred Burliss to P.K. Walsh, a company in Needham that specializes in wigs and hairpieces.

Regarding her new look, Burliss says, "I feel like I'm normal again. I knew I was going to do something. I just had to find the right thing...I believe if you have alopecia, if you have hair loss issues, there are things that you can do. There are solutions out there."