

Turning Frowns Upside Down

By E.T. Robbins



Mom was right. It takes more muscles to frown than to smile. While exercise is good for every other part of the body, the muscles used when we frown leave their mark in the form of wrinkles. This is no laughing matter. And, up until recently, it has not been easy to fix.

Enter botulinum toxin type A, or Botox® as it's commercially called. Developed and sold by Allergan, Inc., it's revolutionizing the cosmetics industry and changing the way we look. The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) reports that 1.6 million botulinum toxin (BTX) procedures were performed in 2002. It ranks first among all cosmetic procedures, and has increased 2400% since 1997.

But is it safe? According to the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), botulinum toxin is a purified form of the bacterium that causes botulism, otherwise known as food poisoning. The difference is in its form. In its natural state, the toxin is deadly. In its purified state, it becomes what some are calling a miracle drug.

Dr. Brooke R. Seckel, MD, chairman of Lahey Clinic's Center for Cosmetic and Laser Surgery in Lexington, says he knew about the drug in the 1980's when it was being used in the treatment of torticollis (severe neck spasms) and ocular spasms. "We noticed when we treated

people with ocular spasms [with Botox®], the spasms went away and so did the wrinkles around their eyes."

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Botox® in 1989, and Botox® Cosmetic in early 2002, for the treatment of frown lines on the forehead in people ages 18-65. Many doctors, however, have been using the

"off-label" applications, such as treating crow's feet, for years.

"Off-label doesn't in any way mean that it's inappropriate or illegal," Dr. Ajaya Kashyap, MD, a plastic surgeon from MetroWest Medical Center in Framingham, notes.

Dr. Seckel says, "It's safe, effective, and quick. It eliminates a lot of surgeries."

According to the AAD, small doses of the botulinum toxin type A are injected into affected muscles. The toxin blocks the chemical that causes the muscle to contract. On the surface, the skin appears smooth due to the relaxed muscle. The "look" lasts 4-6 months.

Imagine going to a party where wine, cheese, and botulinum toxin type A are on the menu. "Botox® Parties" are the new buzzwords.

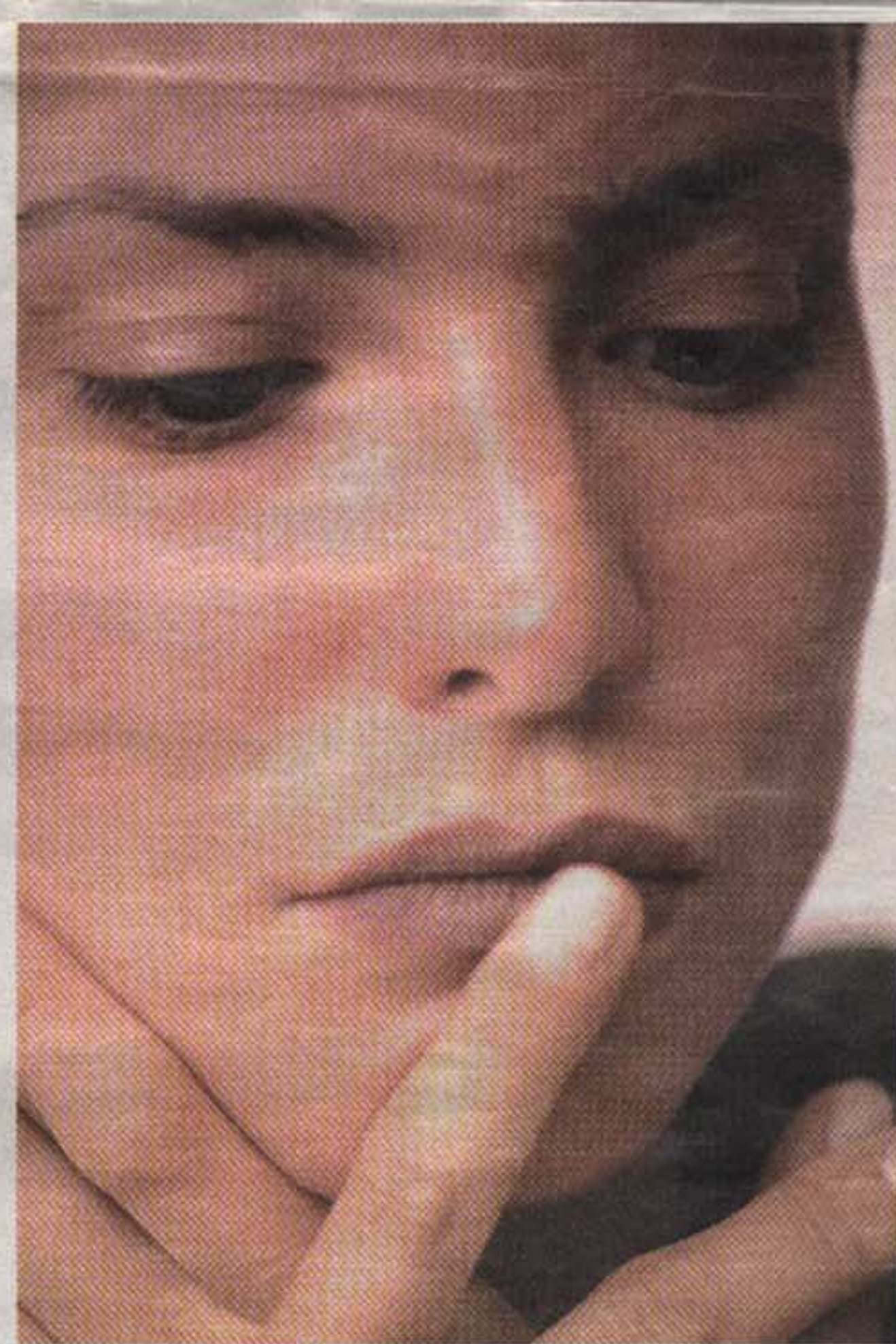
Kathleen Burke, owner of Kathleen Burke European Salon in Rowley, is one of Dr. Seckel's patients. She has been receiving injections for over a year. "The injection burns, but it's a mild burning, not really uncomfortable. After the needle is withdrawn, it's fine. No pain," Burke says.

Doctors may use ice on the area to reduce swelling and minimize any pain. The total procedure takes about 10 minutes. The average cost ranges from \$350 to \$500.

Dr. Stephen Sohn, MD, a diplomat of the American Board of Plastic Surgery and a member of ASAPS, is one of only a handful of MD's in New England authorized by Allergan to train doctors in administering the drug.

Critics of the drug contend that it's still a toxin, and injecting it into the body may prove harmful in the end. However, Dr. Sohn notes that the drug "had to go through rigorous testing in order to receive FDA approval, and that millions of people have received injections. It's probably the safest procedure we do in plastic surgery."

As with any drug, there are possible side effects. The AAD lists ones linked to the



procedure: local redness, swelling, and mild pain. ASAPS adds the possibility of flu-like symptoms and headaches. Allergan reports possible respiratory infections.

If used inappropriately, even "safe" drugs may be dangerous. Imagine going to a party where wine, cheese, and botulinum toxin type A are on the menu. "Botox® Parties" are the new buzzwords. Because several people receive the treatment at the same time and in one location, the cost is less for each individual. The medical community warns, however, that the cost could be significant if there's an accident or if the person administering the injection is not qualified.

Dr. Seckel says, "It's not a smart or wise thing to do. I refuse to do it. Even though it's a safe drug, it is a drug." Dr. Seckel notes that if there is an emergency due to an adverse side effect, a medical environment is equipped to handle the situation whereas the living room of someone's house isn't.

The AAD and ASAPS concur. ASAPS advises: Enjoy the party, but get your BTX injections in the doctor's office. ■

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