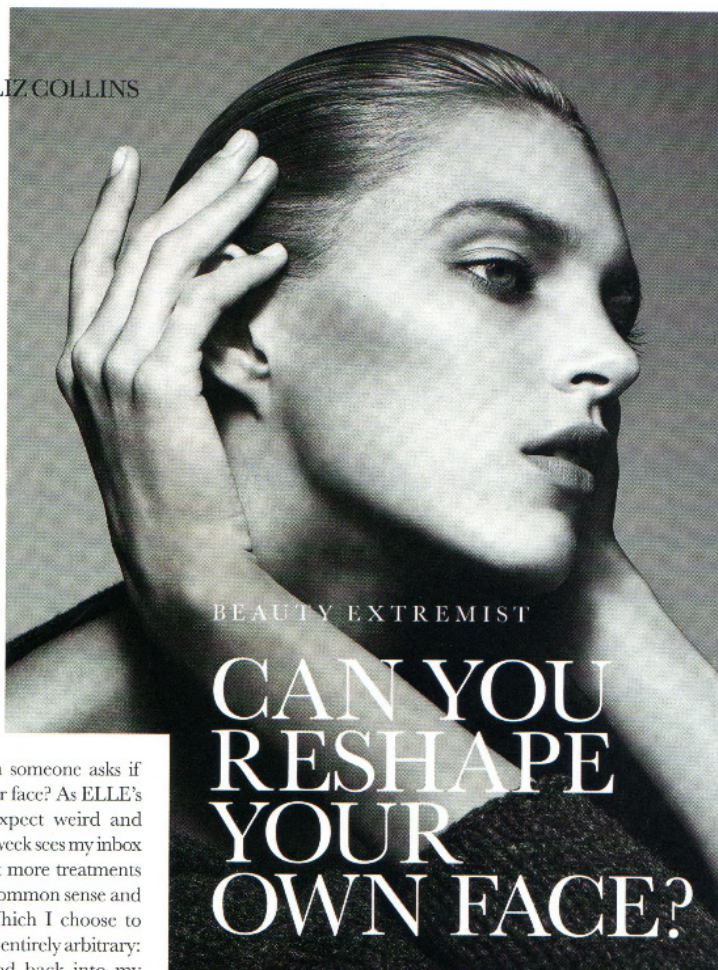




ELLEbeauty

Photograph by LIZ COLLINS



BEAUTY EXTREMIST

CAN YOU RESHAPE YOUR OWN FACE?

What do you say when someone asks if you'd like to regrow your face? As ELLE's Beauty Extremist, I expect weird and wonderful offers. Every week sees my inbox besieged by news of yet more treatments that seem to defy both common sense and scientific credibility. Which I choose to accept sometimes seems entirely arbitrary: injecting my own blood back into my cheeks? Transplanting hair from my head into my brows? Using a supercharged laser to tighten up my knees? Hell, why not? But this seems to go beyond all reason.

Only the fact that it's being proposed by Dr Ayham Al-Ayoubi from the London Medical & Aesthetic Clinic, a man I've already let near my face with a needle, stops me pressing delete.

Dr Ayoubi doesn't just attend to the rich, famous and vain – he works in the NHS, reconstructing the faces of cancer patients, as well as a private clinic in Harley Street. He is a doctor who understands that, despite its frivolous nature, cosmetic surgery is still a very serious business indeed.

Avril Mair believes you can. With the help of a Harley Street stalwart, you can turn back the clock with no trace of a pillow face

What he offers me is Sculptra.

To get scientific, Sculptra is crystallised poly-L-lactic acid, reconstituted with saline and then injected deep into the face. There, it stimulates the production of collagen – which provides the support structure for the skin – and plumps everything up. It's been called the liquid face lift, but it is actually a gradual, natural

process. It takes several sessions over a period of three to six months before you see results, which then last for about four years. It's not an entry-level procedure: there's nothing 'lunch hour' or 'quick fix' about this. Instant gratification doesn't come into it.

In non-technical terms, Sculptra isn't a filler. It doesn't puff up the face or ►



ELLEbeauty

give that over-stuffed look that injectable hyaluronic acid can. Sculptra is, to all intents and purposes, invisible once the water in which it's dissolved has been absorbed. A couple of days after treatment... nothing. No clue. But deep beneath the skin's dermis, its little molecules have set to work.

Unlike hyaluronic fillers, Sculptra can't really be used to excess. It slowly restores volume that has been lost through ageing or dieting – no more and no less. It

primary medical purpose is to rebuild the faces of those suffering from Aids or cancer, and its cosmetic use is just a spin-off of this aim. It lacks addictive glamour.

That doesn't bother me.

There's nothing wrong with my face. Not really. Maybe I look a bit tired. Maybe I look a bit drawn. But I don't want to be stuffed fat with filler. I simply want to look like myself on a really good day. Nothing more than that.

'In some cases, we can improve on what a patient had,' explains Dr Ayoubi. 'Not many. It really depends on the loss of volume in the face. It's not being rude to say that you probably looked fresher and better 10 years ago. Sculptra takes you back

naturally to that state. I wouldn't expect anything better than that.'

And so I find myself with a thick, cold anaesthetic cream plastered over my face while the Sculptra is prepared. Dr Ayoubi angles a bright lamp towards me. Then he starts. The needle stabs in and out, over and over; a series of quick little pricks. It's not the superficial sting of Botox; this is a much more intense sensation. It feels serious.

'You see, it's not hurting,' asserts Dr Ayoubi, injecting me for the umpteenth time. He's right. Of course, it's not exactly pleasant, but every time he takes the needle out, his assistant presses an ice pack to the area so it never really feels painful. It's a bit of an ordeal all the same. I lose count of how many injections I have... three at the side of my brow, another four down from my nose, six along my cheekbone, five more along my jaw line, a few random shots somewhere beneath my eye. And then repeat on the other side.

There's pressure as the solution is injected – around the chin it feels especially firm – though none of it hurts, exactly. But, you know, it's an injection in the face. Correction: it's a whole lot of injections.

Once he has finished, Dr Ayoubi covers my face in aloe gel and vigorously massages it in. I look swollen, a little red. My skin feels on fire.

By the time I get home, however, there's nothing left to see.

I return over the next couple of months for more treatments, each spaced four weeks apart. After every procedure, I have to massage my face to make sure that the Sculptra doesn't form into granules beneath the skin, a possible side effect, though Dr Ayoubi says that in 10 years of carrying out the treatment, 350 patients each year, he has never seen this happen.

'I know the anatomy of the face very well,' he assures me. 'Cosmetic doctors are scared to inject deeply – but actually, the deeper under the dermis you go, the safer it is. Nerves and blood vessels are all near the surface. This way there's less bruising, bleeding or chance of lumps and bumps.'

I notice nothing after the first injections of Sculptra. A couple of small bruises, not much more. I don't really notice anything after the second set of injections either. I have each treatment, then I forget about it. I pretty much forget that I'm having anything done at all. Dr Ayoubi's point soon makes sense: you really have to trust someone who's essentially injecting expensive salt water into your face.

After a few months, I begin to see some small, subtle changes. Then I see bigger changes, definite changes. Maybe I look a bit less tired. Maybe I look a bit less drawn. It's hard to be specific – it happens slowly, really slowly. It is as if the ageing process has been reversed, time ticking backwards, all its work undone. It takes five months to be sure.

Like I say, I get a lot of weird and wonderful offers. I mean, regrowing your own face? Who would buy into that? But sometimes – just sometimes – you have to suspend disbelief. ■

Dr Ayoubi at the London Medical & Aesthetic Clinic. Enq (020) 8342 1100; www.lmaclinic.com

*It is as if the ageing PROCESS
has been reversed, time ticking
backwards, all its WORK undone'*

smooths out wrinkles and pads out hollows, but it can't give chipmunk cheeks or pillowy lips. It's subtle. This is partly why it's not all that popular. 'Dermal fillers offer an immediate result, but with Sculptra, that "wow" effect takes time,' says Dr Ayoubi. 'Patients are reluctant to wait. It's a lot of money to spend and then see nothing right away.'

In America, and now increasingly in Britain, the new breed of cosmetic junkie wants her work to be noticed. You could call it the Lindsay Lohan effect: the aim is to look just a little bit fake, a little bit done. Having the right stuff from the right surgeon is becoming a status symbol, like the perfect shade of Céline handbag or that Burberry aviator straight from the runway. But Sculptra is the opposite of this. It doesn't have the drama of most cosmetic-medicals. There's no grand unveiling, nothing to show off. There's no oozing, blood or bruising. Sculptra's