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Is this goodbye to nip and tuck?

A former anaesthetist's new laser treatments could make traumatic face-lift surgery redundant, finds Catherine Elsworth



Dr Julia Hunter knows a thing or two about cosmetic surgery. As an anaesthetist in Hollywood, she spent the best part of a decade knocking out patients so plastic surgeons could slice them open, pull their skin taut and suck out their fat.

She opted for the field after years in hospitals because it seemed like "happy surgery – people wanted to be there. It's sort of like having a baby; there's a gift package at the end".

But watching the gruelling procedures made her begin to doubt if such trauma was always necessary, whether there weren't easier ways to achieve the same results.

Eventually, she snapped, quit anaesthesia and retrained in state-of-the-art laser technology and a range of non-invasive treatments that, she believes, could herald the death of such surgical procedures as the face- and brow-lift.

With a new clinic, Skin Fitness Plus (its slogan: "young at any age"), Dr Hunter is offering what she believes is a new approach to shedding years and inches for a fraction of the cost of surgery and none of the downtime.

"As I sat there for years and watched all these face-lifts, I thought, 'This doesn't make any sense,'" says Dr Hunter from her sparkingly white, multi-million dollar Beverly Hills medical suite.

"It does nothing for the collagen and integrity of the skin. All it does is take stretched-out skin and stretch it even more. There are six to eight months of swelling and, soon after, the lines come back. I realised

there's a step before this and that's prevention. My goal is to stop people needing plastic surgery."

Dr Hunter was also alarmed at the way people were just "thrown on the table" with no physical preparation, and became determined to establish a more "holistic" system for improving skin that would address every aspect of the body's physiology.

"The key is to work with the body rather than against it. You've got to look at all the pieces of the puzzle – you can't just do something to the outside of the skin without dealing with the inside too."

Her clinic opened in September but, by word of mouth alone, it already has 200 clients, including several Hollywood A-listers (she won't reveal who).

Dr Hunter describes how she can take years off a time-weathered face, remodel a droopy upper arm or sagging knee, un-line a forehead and even flatten a post-baby stomach.

Her tools include a skin-tightening, collagen-stimulating "face-lift" machine that uses radio frequency waves to smooth out wrinkles, lasers for reducing acne scars, spider veins and brown spots, and an old-fashioned scalpel for "dermablading" – whisking off the top layer of skin to make it "look like a polished stone". She also

uses the anti-wrinkle treatments Botox and Restylane.

"Everybody wants to stay at a young age as long as possible, but we all work so hard these days, that nobody has the time nor the inclination for surgery any more. They don't want the scars, they don't want to look pulled and surgery is very expensive. People want to know how they can get rid of the lines around their eyes and yet go out for dinner the same day."

What makes her approach unique, she claims, is the combination of medical, scientific and technological knowledge she applies to skin care, working from a frequently repeated maxim that "beauty is the upside of health". She also uses products that contain no toxic chemicals, including the prescription-only Cosmedix line.

Having explored acupuncture and oriental practices, as well as studying alongside plastic surgeons,

'You've got to look at all the pieces of the puzzle – not just the outside of the skin'

she says her approach has an East-meets-West aspect that blends the best of the old with the most effective modern approaches.

So problems are addressed from both internal – diet, nutrition, hormone levels, fitness – and external perspectives.

"Everybody was treating one tiny little thing and nobody was dealing with the overview – looking at the body as a construction site and making sure you have all the building blocks before you start any work."

Each of her patients is subjected to a raft of tests and interviews before an

individualised action plan is drawn up. She also takes infrared pictures before any treatment begins as "people tend to forget what they looked like and think there's been no change."

Tall and slender with cascading brown curls, clear skin and tidy brows, Dr Hunter looks far younger than her 50 years.

She freely admits to taking advantage of the technology that surrounds her. "Oh, I've tried everything," she says in a strong Southern accent (she is from Alabama). "I've had the veins on my face done. I've tried Thermage [the radio frequency treatment] so I know what it feels like."

She has also exhaustively researched almost every laser on the market to find the best machines. "I've got scars all over me from testing out lasers," she says, pulling up the leg of her pinstriped suit to reveal a mark on her ankle.

"Salesmen say, 'Oh this is the lowest setting, it's perfect for what you want,' but often

it's not. This is powerful technology. You have to get it right."

Interestingly, increasing numbers of her patients are men, seeking the same treatments as women. "I think they are more comfortable with the science and technology of this approach. It's not like a spa, the products are not at all girly – and men always want fast results. They say, 'What can I do that works the quickest?'"

Her treatments, costing between \$500-5,000 (£300-£3,000), are not cheap, although they are less than a lot of surgery. Many patients are drawn by her infectious passion for her work.

Not that it makes her an extremist, however. Reassuringly, she believes in moderation and common sense. "I still eat, drink and make merry. After all, life is meant to be lived."

"We're not miracle workers. Gravity always wins and the clock's always ticking. But, in the meantime, we can slow it down as much as is scientifically and technologically possible. You can keep the body's engine running very efficiently if you give it the right gas and oil."

Putting it all together:

Dr Julia Hunter, far left, can take years off a time-weathered face with a 'face-lift' machine that uses radio frequency waves to smooth out wrinkles

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