

The Seattle Times

Saturday, February 12, 2005 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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In pursuit of "natural beauty"

By **Julia Sommerfeld**

Seattle Times staff reporter

Call it Botox backlash: Sharon Page, 56, wants to age "naturally." As in, no scalpels, injections, lasers or liposuction. But that doesn't mean the Seattle businesswoman welcomes those crinkles settling in around her eyes and mouth.

That's why she has more than 30 hair-thin needles poking out of her crow's-feet, laugh lines and forehead. She's in her fifth session of "facial rejuvenation acupuncture," which she believes already has shrunk the bags under her eyes and firmed up her cheeks.

"Acupuncture seems healthier, more natural," says Page. "Certainly better than having your face cut and peeled back."

Perhaps it's the next step in our obsession with all things labeled whole, organic and all-natural. Or it's the complementary-medicine community hopping on the lucrative makeover bandwagon. Whatever the reason, folks like Page are increasingly turning to holistic remedies for their cosmetic complaints and giving the phrase "natural beauty" new meaning.

"Seattle has always embraced alternative medicine, and as everywhere, baby boomers are searching for ways to stay looking young, so it's no surprise these approaches are taking off here," says Jane Gultinan, a naturopathic physician and director of the Bastyr Center for Women's Wellness.

At least a dozen acupuncturists around Seattle are taking aim at wrinkles with their tiny needles. Bastyr University will offer a continuing-education class in cosmetic acupuncture this spring. There's a Rolfer in Madison Park who promotes his massage technique as a "nonsurgical facelift." And a Roosevelt clinic that practices an ancient form of Hindi medicine now offers facials tailored to your personal constitution — or "dosha."

There's no hard evidence behind these treatments — and often no real scientific explanation for how or why they might work — but there are plenty of women peering into the mirror afterward and admiring what they see.

Spare the scalpel

Rhonda Shumway-Luna of Woodinville won't disclose her age — "let's just say I'm 45-plus" — but she will reveal her beauty secret. A couple of times a month, she has her face kneaded by Misha Noonan of Rejuvenate with Rolfig. "I heard Madonna gets her face Rolfed and she looks fantastic, so I thought, 'Why not try it?' " she explains.

For those who aren't familiar with the New-Agey brand of deep-tissue massage, the idea behind Rolfig is to lengthen the connective tissues of the body to release tension, ease pain and improve posture. Noonan, a licensed massage therapist who has clinics in Woodinville and Madison Park, charges \$125 an hour to slowly stretch the tissues under the skin, which he says plumps and "lifts" sagging, wrinkly faces.

"The lines around my nose and mouth have cleared up a lot. My whole face looks more rested. And that means when I look at myself, I don't just stare at the lines and get depressed," Shumway-Luna says.

Seattle plastic surgeon Dr. Lisa Sowder is skeptical, to say the least. "No amount of facial massage is going to lift a face." That, she says, requires a scalpel.

At most, she expects a vigorous Rolfig session — or even facial acupuncture — might produce some swelling that makes the face look fuller, at least temporarily. Her advice: "You're better off spending your money on a good sunscreen and saving up for a real procedure."

Mind, body ... beauty?

The 4,000-year-old Indian health tradition of ayurveda, which uses herbs, oils, nutrition, cleansing and yoga as preventive medicine, also has been co-opted as a beauty regimen.

Vivek Shanbhag, a naturopath in the Roosevelt district, recently added a beauty and wellness spa to his ayurvedic practice, AYU Natural Medicine Clinic. Even Spa Nordstrom offers ayurvedic facials.

"In ayurveda, beauty is from the inside out, rather than skin deep," Shanbhag says.

Ayurveda teaches that humans are made of three basic qualities, or dosha. When these are thrown out of whack by stress, junk food or shabby sleep, then illness — and, apparently, ugliness — can arise.

AYU's trademark beauty treatment is "shirodhara," in which a stream of warm oil is drizzled on the "third eye" in the center of the forehead. While it resembles Chinese water torture, the \$90 therapy is actually a relaxing experience that's supposed to balance your dosha, says ayurvedic aesthetician

Cynthia Ratliff.

When Roxann Hawley, a 51-year-old home-health-care worker, experienced her first shirodhara this week, she explained, "I know it sounds ridiculous in Western thinking, but I felt an unknotting of all the tension in my face and in my body. ... And now, as I look in the mirror, the wrinkle I usually have between my brows — that worry wrinkle — is gone."

Barbara Hintzen first tackled that pesky brow wrinkle with Botox. But after a few times, Hintzen, 48, found that while the wrinkle was gone, she didn't think she looked any prettier. "I thought it made my face look kind of flat," she says.

So, like many folks do when they're disappointed with the solutions offered by mainstream doctors, the Seattle saleswoman looked to alternative medicine.

She now undergoes routine facial acupuncture at Return to Radiance from Brigitte Ardea, a full-time cosmetic acupuncturist who splits her practice between Seattle and Mercer Island. Ardea says the needles draw circulation of blood and the body's vital energy, known as "Qi" in Chinese medicine, to the face. "My skin looks the best it ever has," says Hintzen. "I'm not wrinkle-free or anything, but I look glowing. I'm the picture of health."

And that's what separates these more holistic treatments from Western medicine's fixes, says Maureen Conant, a Wedgwood acupuncturist who charges between \$85 and \$100 for an hour of cosmetic needling.

"My clients aren't going for drastic, they aren't trying to look like someone else," she says. "We bring out their own natural beauty that comes from being healthy and well cared for, not Botoxed."

After she slides the needles out of Sharon Page's slightly flushed skin, Page shakes herself awake and unfolds her arms in a luxurious stretch. "At the very least, you know, this is relaxing. It makes me feel good.

"And when you feel good ... you look good."

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