

A warm trickle of blood is slowly making its way down my neck. I'm lying on a surgical couch in a clean, white room, a sterile gown covering my upper body. There's a stinging sensation in my left arm from where the blood was taken a few short minutes ago, thick and red, slurping greedily into the vial. I'm digging my nails into the palms of my hands. My heart is racing; my breathing is shallow and ragged. And no wonder: a man is leaning over me, a full syringe in his hand. My face is already dotted with tens of tiny pinpricks where he has inserted the needle. By the time he's finished, it will be covered in many, many more. This is no horror film, though it's certainly dramatic and bloody enough. I'm the first British journalist to undergo platelet injection therapy, a revolutionary treatment that could change the way we deal with ageing forever.

Let's get the scientific stuff out of the way first. As we know, age isn't kind to a face. Fat in the cheeks starts slowly disappearing in our mid-twenties, causing everything else to sag. The way to reverse that isn't by wielding a scalpel and hauling it all back up, as surgeons used to believe. Instead, it's what the beauty industry terms 'volumising' – injecting filler to recreate the lost fat. Add a bit of Botox and you have the modern-day prescription for stopping time.

But not everyone wants synthetic substances stuffed into their face. It's expensive and temporary. Besides, it doesn't always look that great. Google 'pillow face' for proof. While science labs try to develop cosmeceuticals – beauty treatments that are swallowed and work from within – the idea of youth-in-a-syringe still resonates. For the past several years, the search for

a more natural anti-ageing solution has focused on injecting fat from the body back into the lines of the face. The trouble is that it has to be removed first using liposuction, which is neither painless nor pleasant, and the fat doesn't survive that long anyway. Then London-based cosmetic doctor Roberto Viel worked out a way to use a patient's own blood to stimulate collagen production, the holy grail of anti-ageing. Rather than just treating the signs of ageing by temporarily plumping up wrinkles, he claims to be able to activate stem cells and actually rejuvenate the skin itself.

Although this sounds like yet another empty promise in an industry full of empty promises, it has an impressive medical history. US studies indicate that injecting platelet-rich plasma – the 'useful' part of blood, full of natural proteins that reverse damage in the body – into sports injuries can lead to faster recovery. Racchorses and athletes alike are routinely treated this way. As someone who failed both biology and chemistry exams at school, I can't pretend

BEAUTY EXTREMIST

DRACULA THERAPY: ARE YOU BRAVE ENOUGH?

Is having your own BLOOD injected into your face the MIRACLE anti-ageing treatment the world has been waiting for? Avril Mair finds out

to understand exactly what's going on. But, basically, the treatment harnesses the body's ability to heal itself. And that sounds good enough for me.

In a street of private clinics and discreet surgeries, Dr Viel's offices are grander than most. He has a rich and forever-young client list that's rumoured to include Kylie, and the kind of expansive wood-panelled waiting rooms that attest to wealth and success. One of the world's most recognised cosmetic surgeons, operating in Harley Street since 1990 and with a practice in Dubai that opened two years ago, he works alongside his brother Maurizio. Together, the Italian duo has pioneered treatments such as Vaser Lipo – an ultrasound lipo treatment. Platelet injection therapy is the latest development in their relentless quest to turn back time. Although there are other London doctors working with patients' own blood – 'Dracula Therapy', as it has been dubbed by the tabloids, delighted by the *Twilight*-friendly headline – Dr Viel dismisses their

efforts with professional ease: 'They inject serum, which is the part of the blood I throw away.'

His treatment is straightforward enough. After taking a sample of blood, the platelets are separated using a centrifuge, then injected directly into the patient's face. It's a relatively fast and painless procedure – but it's not one of the 'lunch hour' quick fixes that clinics like to brag about. Being poked by a needle several hundred times isn't something I'd swap my M&S sandwich for. Besides, bruises and swelling don't usually occur with injectables like Botox and Restylane, though you have to be prepared for the possibility. With Platelet Injection Therapy, Dr Viel warns that it's inevitable.

Despite this, I find myself sitting on a couch in one of his treatment rooms while anaesthetic cream is smeared liberally over my face. It will take around 20 minutes for the blood to spin; in the meantime, I wait for numbness to creep slowly across my cheeks.

When Dr Viel finally appears, three syringes of brownish fluid sit in a steel dish. He shows me the needle that will be used to inject them back into my face – so thin it needs to be replaced several times during the 20-minute procedure.

I lie flat. Dr Viel tells me to close my eyes. He works quickly and gently, using a feather-light touch, moving methodically across one side of my face at a time. His focus is mostly on the fine lines beneath my eyes, though he also injects my jawline and cheekbones. As he goes, he constantly pushes and presses the skin with gloved hands, moving the blood into place beneath my skin. It isn't painful. It's unpleasant, of course, but I hardly feel the needle as it slides in. Again and again. Thirty needle pricks later, Dr Viel murmurs an apology: 'There's a little bruising.'

He carries on. I feel my face filling up. There's no better way to describe it as the blood pools beneath my skin. I imagine it would feel squishy if I were to touch it. I don't.

Then it's all over. Dr Viel rubs a nourishing serum over my skin and tells me not to wash it off until the next morning. I am hot and red and shiny. When I look in the mirror, I can see every single pinpoint standing out in sharp relief. A small black spot marks the bruise he noted.

Apart from this, I won't see results for a while. When change happens to my skin – if change happens – it will be gradual, over the next three to six weeks. I have no idea what to expect or

how I will look. I have no idea if all this unpleasantness will do anything at all. Unlike the instant gratification offered by synthetic injectables, Platelet injection therapy is a commitment and a leap of faith.

I sit in a consultation room with ice packs pressed to my face for half an hour to try to stop the swelling. Fingers freezing, cheeks on fire, I have plenty of time to consider my foolishness. In the room next door, a man is about to undergo fat injections into his penis. Clearly foolishness is a matter of personal opinion. I swallow arnica pills and hope for the best.

I'm ready to leave Dr Viel's clinic exactly 90 minutes after I arrive. It's my last day at work for a week, so I have no choice but to head straight back to the office afterwards. I walk; it's easier than giving directions to a cab driver with a face that betrays just what I've been doing in Harley Street. By the time I get there, I'm pale and puffy, with bright red cheeks and bruises blossoming beneath one eye. By the end of the afternoon, parts of my face have raised into strange weals and there is ominous darkening underneath the other eye. It feels like a long cab ride home.

The next morning, the worst side effects seem to have disappeared on the left side. There's still shading beneath the skin and the eye looks swollen, as though I've been weeping. The right eye, however, looks like it's been punched. Even industrial-strength concealer won't hide it. I plaster on Laura Mercier Secret

Camouflage and pull down my fringe.

The following day, 48 hours after the treatment, I have bags underneath both eyes and definite, defined bruising. This deepens over the next week until there's a mask of yellow round the upper part of my face. The swelling still won't go.

It takes 10 days to return to normal. It takes another 10 days before I start to see some changes. I can't quite put my finger on what it is, but my skin looks younger, fresher, a little plumper. The fine lines beneath my eyes seem to be smoothing out. These improvements should keep happening for the next few weeks and last for about six months.

It's subtle and gradual and, honestly, most people wouldn't notice. But I do. The fact is, I am getting younger by the day. It's written in blood. ■

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