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How reflexology helped heal my facial scar

Caroline Boucher turned to a reflexology technique borrowed from South American tribes after melanoma surgery left a mark.



The therapy holds that massaging the face can realign the body's 'meridians'

By Caroline Boucher

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Just over a year ago, I had a malignant melanoma, a type of skin cancer, dug out of my face. It left me shattered and with a hole about the size of a 50p piece in my left cheek. Initially, I had a skin graft, followed by reconstructive surgery, and waited for the scar to settle down.

After nine months, I still had a hard, two-inch Z-shape on my cheekbone, while the area underneath was raised and puffy. The healing process seemed to have ground to a halt. It was then that a friend suggested I try facial reflexology.

Reflexology gets a mixed reception in this country, particularly from doctors. This is understandable, given the lack of evidence in its favour: one review of the research from

2009 could find no studies to “demonstrate convincingly” its effectiveness for any medical condition.

It was used by the ancient Egyptians and Chinese, and the theory is that applying pressure to certain points on the feet can trigger a healing process in corresponding areas of the body, although there is no scientific explanation as to why this technique might work. As the name implies, facial reflexology concentrates on the face rather than the feet.

The diagnosis of melanoma in my late fifties came as a shock. Two years earlier, I had noticed a red mark on my cheek about the size of a drawing pin. The GP said it was nothing to worry about (they are trained to look for certain changes to moles, rather than what looked like a bad mosquito bite). But when it started to look worse, I was referred to a dermatologist who took a biopsy. That’s when I was told that I had this potentially fatal form of skin cancer. Fortunately, it had not spread into other tissue.

I had the cancer cut out, but had to return three times for further surgery when lab analyses of the tissue suggested that cancer cells remained in the surrounding area. A skin graft from under my arm was stitched over the wound, and for several months I wore a large bandage on my face. Some months later, it was clear that the skin on the graft was never going to match that on my face – it was a completely different colour and texture. I consulted a plastic surgeon and, six months after my initial operation, he removed the skin graft and cut a flap into my cheek, cleverly pulling the skin over to cover the hole. It was this last operation that resulted in the Zorro-like scar.

At that point, I hadn’t heard of facial reflexology, a massage-based therapy developed in Denmark. Its founder, Lone Sorensen, had been impressed by certain tribal practices in South America in which the women undergo daily facial massage with rosehip oil. It sounds wacky but it is believed that, because the face is close to the brain, massaging it in a particular fashion stimulates parts of the body via the central nervous system. This, it is claimed, can realign the body’s “meridians” – the 12 “pathways” that acupuncturists also put their faith in.

For the past eight months, I have had a weekly, 90-minute session of this type of massage. It is an extraordinary experience which almost puts me in a trance. Pierpaolo Lai, my reflexologist, uses rosehip oil to massage the face firmly, applying a mix of circular pressure, and longer, feather-like strokes, with lighter pressure on the scar itself.

Although I attend primarily for the scar, the treatment covers every square inch of the face except for lips and eyelids, with the aim of “unblocking energy” in different organs. Pressure on my so-called “third eye” (just above the nose) is apparently stimulating my pancreas and colon. Pressure low on my cheekbone has benefits for the stomach.

So what are the results? My scar is still there, but far less prominent. The wound area is softer and more normal in colour: it was previously pale, denoting lack of blood supply. Overall, my complexion has also improved.

I have to concede it is quite possible that time alone would have healed my scar. My plastic surgeon, Adriaan Grobbelaar, one of the British facial transplant team at the Royal Free Hospital, London, certainly has no time for the therapy, describing it as “mumbo-jumbo”.

“There’s no objective evidence and certainly no medical scientific information available about this technique,” he told me. On the other hand, he conceded that “complementary therapy” can be helpful for patients under certain circumstances. “There might be something in it,” he admitted.

Whatever the medics say, I’m undeterred. Although I tried facial reflexology primarily to help heal the scar, I believe that the massage has also helped reduce the sky-high stress levels my diagnosis has caused me. Plus, I now have brilliant skin texture and tone. Mumbo-jumbo or not, it worked for me.

Pierpaolo Lai is a reflexology therapist at Neville Hair & Beauty (Pont Street, London SW1, 020 7235 3654); sessions from £90