

BOTOX: A Miracle Drug?

By Lissa Poirot

Renee Clark's* headaches were debilitating. For years, she suffered from painful migraines and took every medication under the sun. When her neurologist heard about an off-label use of BOTOX to eliminate headaches, he took a chance and referred her to Cynthia Gregg, MD, a board certified facial plastic surgeon in Cary, North Carolina. Clark was willing to try anything to make the pain go away. It worked.

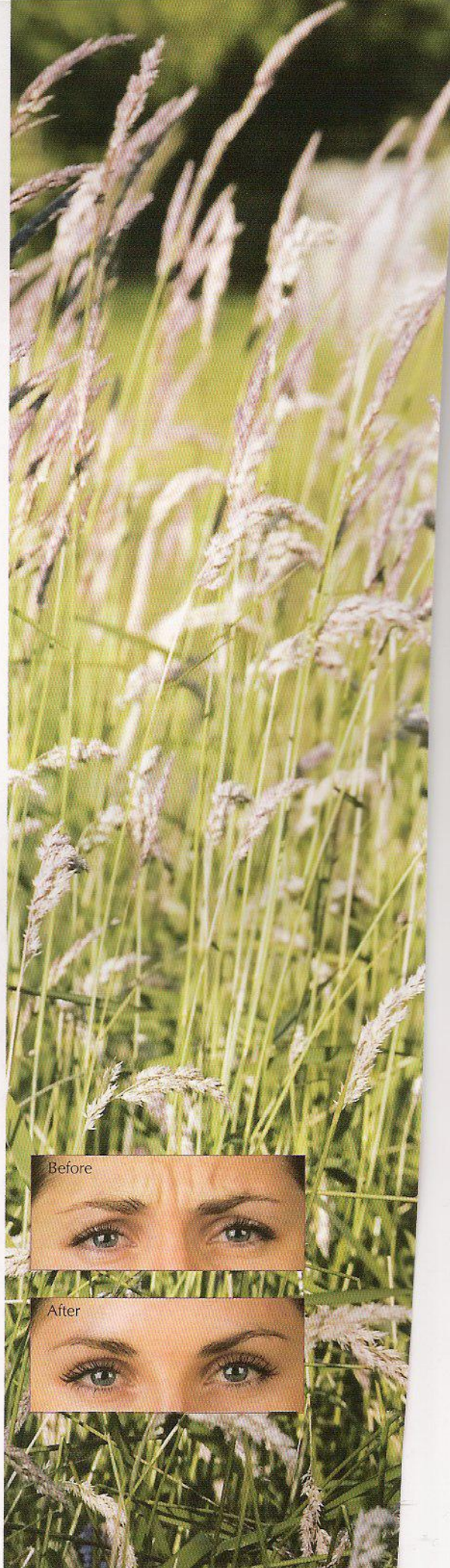
Federally approved in 2002 to treat wrinkles, BOTOX Cosmetic, or Botulinum Toxin Type A, is a purified protein that is administered via tiny injections; it helps to reduce the muscle activity that causes frown lines on the forehead and between the brows. Jason Holbrook, MD, of Rejuvenation Spa in Roswell, Georgia, creates a mental picture of how BOTOX works: "Imagine when you walk with ankle weights, how heavy your legs feel. But when you take the weights off, your legs feel lighter and you can lift them higher. That's how I explain to my patients what happens with BOTOX. By releasing tension in one muscle, it lifts other muscles in the forehead."

For Dr. Gregg, prescribing BOTOX was a no-brainer. She performs mostly cosmetic procedures and sees 20–25 recurring patients per week for the treatment of migraine headaches at her private practice. "If muscle tension is the trigger that causes the patient's headaches, then injecting BOTOX into those muscles to relax them relieves the tension and gets rid of the trigger," Dr. Gregg says.

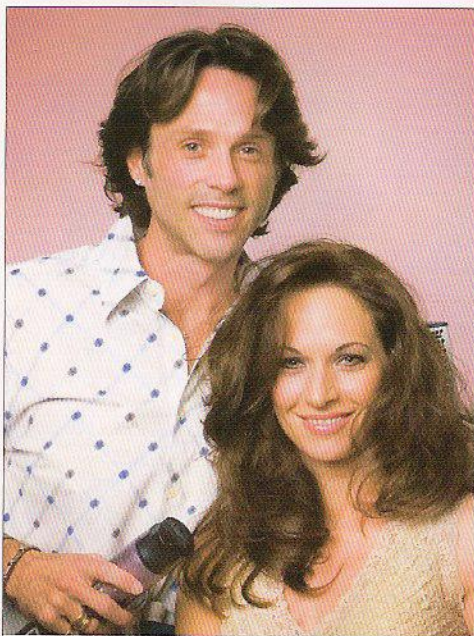
Doctors around the country have made similar discoveries, leading to multiple uses of BOTOX. One pioneer in Texas discovered that the drug prevented neurotransmitters from relaying messages to the brain, leading to the approval of BOTOX for treatment of abnormal blinking, or blepharospasm. Additionally, there have been reports that the drug is an effective treatment for sialorrhea, or drooling, in patients with Parkinson's disease. Others have found that the same philosophy works to treat back pain, muscle spasms, writer's cramps and multiple sclerosis, although these uses have not received approval from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

"BOTOX blocks a chemical called acetylcholine from the nerve ending to the muscle, so the muscle never gets the signal to tense. That's how it works cosmetically, and it's the same kind of tension that affects headaches and back pain," Dr. Gregg says. That chemical is also the body's stimulator of sweat glands, which is why BOTOX was recently approved to treat excessive sweating.

"We use a fair amount of BOTOX in our practice for hyperhidrosis, which is excessive sweating that isn't controlled by topical drying agents," says Donald Sudy, MD, of ReGenesis Medical Spa & Wellness Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. "These are people who have a condition without a definable cause, which typically occurs in the armpit areas, the hands and the soles of the feet. It is embarrassing for







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people who may need to shake hands often, or for those who have to change shirts several times a day due to extreme sweating.”

With so many applications, it is no wonder that BOTOX has earned ‘The Miracle Drug’ moniker, and that a growing number of doctors are examining off-label usage. A recent study revealed BOTOX may play a role in easing depression, although doctors are not sure if it is merely a side effect of looking better—the ‘when-you-look-good-you-feel-good’ mantra. Dr. Sudy injects BOTOX near surgical scars to help soften the muscle tension and allow the scar to heal better; Dr. Holbrook uses BOTOX to loosen or tighten muscles in the vaginal area, especially in women with incontinence or intercourse problems post childbirth. Although BOTOX is not approved for such uses, the physicians feel their patients have nothing to fear.

“The FDA approval process is quite rigorous, and the Administration declared BOTOX was safe to inject into the body,” says Dr. Holbrook, citing only mild side effects such as temporary greater-than-intended muscle weakness, droopy eyelids, headaches and flu-like symptoms.

Because BOTOX is mostly used for cosmetic purposes, insurance companies are not covering off-label uses of the drug; however, doctors are hopeful that its multiple benefits will soon be realized. Whether or not BOTOX will live up to its heal-all name remains to be seen, but for patients like Clark, the drug is more than just a wrinkle eraser— it’s a lifesaver. ✿

*Patient’s name has been changed to protect identity.

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