



TROPICAL LIFE

Tue, Nov. 11, 2003

New techniques make hair transplants more effective

BY DANIELA LAMAS
dlamas@herald.com

The Vietnam vet drove from West Virginia to Miami so that Dr. Jeffrey Epstein could remove a strip of his scalp, separate the hair and replant it into 2,200 skin-deep incisions in his bald, anesthetized pate.

That's how much 57-year old Ace wanted hair. He'd covered up with baseball caps for years, but retirement had given him time to indulge and pay closer attention to the man in the mirror.

"This was a perfect opportunity," said Ace, who decided on the \$7,000 procedure after seeing a friend with a natural-looking hair transplant.

Recent surgical advances mean Ace, and millions of American men like him, can expect more attractive results than ever before. But the best technologies are labor-intensive, expensive and -- if done poorly -- can leave patients still desperate for hair and dissatisfied with results.

DATES BACK TO 60s

Today's hair transplantation was born in the 1960s, when doctors found that hair kept growing when they moved chunks of skin and hair from one part of the scalp to another. The results were mixed, creating a telltale pattern often compared to doll's hair or toothbrush bristles.

The years brought more bizarre surgeries. The tissue-expansion method in the 1980s required doctors to implant inflatable, saline-filled bags underneath the scalp. The skin -- both bald and hair-producing -- would stretch, so that when doctors removed the bags, they'd be able to cover the skull with the newly expanded hair.

Epstein, a plastic surgeon who is president of Miami's Foundation for Hair Restoration, started performing hair transplantation in 1993, with mini-grafting. This meant transplanting small pieces of skin and hair. He changed four years ago to follicular unit grafts, a tedious procedure grafting each root separately to give the most natural result. Doctors can't create follicles, so they aim for an illusion of more hair, using what's there.

Epstein is experimenting with transplanting hair from other areas, like the beard.

Laboratory researchers hold out promise for gene therapy, and ways to make the follicle start growing hair again.

On this recent weekday, Ace was the only one scheduled, to make time for the 2,200 follicle, four-hour transplant.

First, Epstein cut a "donor strip" of scalp and hair from the back of Ace's numbed head, leaving a red, pulpy strip that would be sewed up to leave no detectable scar.

The strip of skin and hair then went to the roomful of technicians, two of whom were doctors in Cuba. In the coming hours, they would trim it down to the finest unit of measurement -- the follicle. They chatted while peering into high-powered microscopes, hands moving quickly to separate the hair from the skin and fat with delicate jeweler's forceps.

When enough hair was ready, Epstein started poking a tiny blade into Ace's numbed head, one incision for each follicle. It's painstaking work, but Ace was only half-awake, and Epstein enjoys the routine and eventual reward.

"I'm using my hands to construct something," he said. ``Every day, I'm taking two guys and six months later, they're feeling better about themselves."

On the day of Ace's recent surgery, Miami resident Lance Sappington, 31, returned to Epstein's office to have his hair washed.

An administrator at the University of Miami School of Medicine and a part-time model, Sappington is tall, chiseled and balding. The top of his head was dark red and scabbed from the surgery the day before, as it would remain for about a week. Then, the transplanted hair would fall out and three months later, new hair would start to grow.

MODELING, VANITY

He called his decision to get a transplant ``60 percent modeling and 40 percent vanity."

Sappington, born in Idaho, said if he still lived there he would have cut his hair short and forgotten about it. But here in Miami, trying to make it as a model, the hair loss that started at the end of college was making him miserable.

Waking up to notice a bald spot could ruin his day. He loves the ocean, but hated how his hair looked when wet. He had another transplant with a different doctor, but had continued to lose hair.

He remained hopeful, believing that the \$6,500 would make a more lasting difference this time. It was a huge financial drain, he said, but he considered it an investment in his modeling career. Besides, it was worth more to him than a vacation.

"I'd do this in a heartbeat before a trip to Italy," Sappington said. ``Italy will be there and I want to take pictures with hair."

