

Botox Gives a Special Lift to These Soirees

By RACHEL ZIMMERMAN

CALL IT A TUPPERWARE PARTY with needles.

Maria Brown's fete began at 7 p.m., when guests arrived at her 4-bedroom home in Westchester, a tony neighborhood in Redmond, Wash. As the hors d'oeuvres circulated, Dr. David Stephens, a Bellevue, Wash., plastic surgeon, laid out a tray on the dining room table: sterilized needles and several vials of Botox, botulinum toxin type A—a purified protein derived from bacteria that, when ingested, can cause botulism. Botox, when injected in the face, temporarily erases the signs of aging.

After a 15-minute talk on how the procedure works and a bit of history about the drug, made by Allergan Inc., Dr. Stephens took questions about costs (discounted to \$250 a pop for these special partygoers) and potential side effects, which can include paralysis of nearby muscles, headache, localized numbness, rash, bruising, local swelling, disorientation and double vision. Then, after each woman signed a consent form, the lineup began. With soft jazz playing in the background, the partyers chatted in the living room as each guest slipped away into the formal dining room for a quick procedure.

Every time a patient emerged, post-Botox, the others offered a round of applause. Ms. Brown went last. She got five injections in her face: three between the eyebrows; one on each temple. Then she had a drink. Four days later, she says: "No frown, no frown lines."

Dr. Stephens provided the champagne and snacks for this particular party and asked Ms. Brown, already a patient, if she'd be interested in

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Botox parties—complete with invitations, injections and hors d'oeuvres are spreading coast to coast.

hosting. He now conducts regular Botox parties and says getting 10 clients at a time is great for business.

"I started out with about five patients a week, then soon it was 15 to 20 a week, then a patient said, wouldn't this be great with a glass of champagne," says Dr. Stephens, who also injects his own face with Botox. "It's really pretty cool."

Though it wasn't approved for cosmetic use until yesterday, Allergan's Botox has long been used by doctors to eliminate signs of aging by relaxing the facial muscles. Yesterday's approval was solely for treatment of brow furrows, but Allergan, Irvine, Calif., says

it is in discussions with the FDA to win approval for treatment of crows feet and forehead wrinkles, as well. (See article on the FDA's approval of Botox on page DG.) Botox parties are the latest marketing gimmick by dermatologists, plastic surgeons and other doctors who see it as a way to treat many patients at once and as a way to create a buzz and more business. These intimate, though controversial, private gatherings redefine the notion of house calls. For patients, mixing cocktail hour with cosmetic injections takes some of the anxiety out of the procedure. And for doctors, providing Botox to as many as 10 patients in less than 60 minutes offers a potential financial boon. The treatment costs between \$250 and \$1,000, and must be repeated every three-to-six months.

The Botox beauty bashes seem to have started in Los Angeles, but have quickly spread across the nation, from the upper East Side of Manhattan to the wealthy suburban enclaves around Seattle. "Ours was just so fabulous," say Ms. Brown, 32 years old, who held her first Botox party last week with 10 friends, over champagne, chocolate truffles and brie. "The private setting makes it so relaxed—it didn't feel so much like it was this big procedure."

For Dr. Joseph Eviatar, an ocular plastic surgeon at the Chelsea Eye Center, in lower Manhattan, the idea of the Botox party dawned on him last summer, when all of his clients fled the city. "Someone said, 'Why not do it in the Hamptons?'" So, last August, the doctor held a Botox party at his own home in South Hampton, N.Y. After a brief discussion about benefits and potential risks, everyone starts drinking, Dr. Eviatar says. "It really takes the edge off."

Botox Gives a Lift in Comfort of Your Own Home

His next party is tonight in Manhattan, at the home of his public relations consultant, Katherine Rothman. Claire Cowan, a freelance fashion stylist, plans to attend with a few friends. "I don't want to show any signs of aging," says Ms. Cowan, 33. "And I thought this would be a fun way to be around other women, maybe a few men, and have some good camaraderie." Moreover, she says: "I'm hoping a party at a private home will have less of that sterile office feel."

But some doctors express horror at this laid-back attitude to injecting a toxic compound into the face.

"I am sort of aghast," says Robert Bernard, a White Plains plastic surgeon and vice president of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. "I'm unhappy with the concept [of a Botox party]-this is a medical treatment."

To avoid this reproof, several doctors offer a sort of hybrid party: a private white-wine and cheese get-together in the office with a few special clients. Michael Sachs, a facial plastic surgeon with an office on Central Park South, started offering free Botox treatments as gifts to patients who brought in new customers. Then, a few years ago, he says, so many women wanted the treatment that he began holding little office soirees.

Maureen Ingram 55, happened to be on a shopping trip in New York when she accepted an invitation to one of the doctor's gatherings. Ms. Ingram, who splits her time between a home outside London and another on Spain's Costa del Sol, recalled how over drinks at Dr. Sachs's office she got injections between her eyes. "Just amazing," is how she described the results. And the setting, she said, was ideal. "It takes away the whole doctor/patient feel."

Physicians have embraced Botox for a simple reason: It makes them money.' Dr. Sachs, of New York, says one vial of Botox costs him about \$400. He charges \$300 per treatment area and each vial covers three treatments.

Botox's maker, Allergan, doesn't appear to be behind the party craze. But Allergan is certainly friendly with many leading dermatologists, plastic surgeons and neurologists and has recruited them as consultants, clinical trial investigators, and as trainers of the Botox technique. For example, a husband-and-wife doctor team in Canada discovered the cosmetic use of Botox, and the husband has been a. longtime paid consultant for Allergan and a lead investigator on the main clinical trial submitted for FDA approval.

More than 100 of the top Botox-using dermatologists and plastic surgeons were flown to San Francisco in January where they were wined, dined and lodged at the Drake hotel, and asked their opinions of a new ad campaign that's about to run.

A spokeswoman for Allergan says the company isn't in a position to dictate how a physician runs his or her practice. However, internal company focus groups have found that consumers "are more pleased when it's done in a professional setting," the spokeswoman said. As for flying doctors out to San Francisco in January, an Allergan spokeswoman called the gathering "an advisory meeting" and said: "It's standard practice." She adds the overall marketing program for cosmetic Botox is \$50 million through the end of the year.

Even without the ads, consumer demand has been remarkable, doctors say. And it's not just women. Male litigators are frequent Botox users, according to one doctor, who says many lawyers get treatments about a week before a big trial to appear less angry and more sympathetic to jurors.

In fact, the cosmetic use of Botox has expanded so much that yesterday's approval seems nothing more than a formality. Esta Kronberg, a Houston dermatologist, says, "We've been using it for so long."