

WITH A BIG BIRTHDAY COMING UP, ANDREW COPESTAKE THOUGHT IT TIME TO TAKE YEARS OFF HIS LIFE WITH A FACIAL

The long winter months can play havoc with your skin. First, there are the endless pre-Christmas parties, followed by overindulgence at Christmas itself, an all-night binge on New Year's Eve, and two months of hibernation with the central heating turned up full-blast and a "Tesco's Finest" balanced on your knees. Come spring, the Great British Public emerges from its burrows looking ashen-faced and well past its prime. This is hardly the kind of condition to get you noticed on the beauty-obsessed gay scene, and it may just have you obsessing about the merits of cosmetic surgery. However, there are less radical alternatives.

Dr Sean Cummings, who heads one of the south of England's leading medical aesthetic clinics (and the only one dedicated to the treatment of gay and bisexual men), has now introduced a brand-new treatment for complete skin rejuvenation, called microdermabrasion. In the interest of research – and, more importantly, with a "big" birthday coming up – I decided to put it to the test. Although I didn't buy into extravagant claims (not made by Sean) that it could take 20 years off my face, I thought that a couple, or five, would equate to money well spent. And, despite the alarming name (which conjured up images of a mini Black & Decker sander skimming across my cheekbones), I was assured that the treatment was relatively painless, with no long-term side effects – somewhere between a full skin peel and a deep-pore massage at Champneys.

Microdermabrasion, which is suitable for all skin types, exfoliates the skin without the use of any chemicals or lasers by propelling a jet of aluminium oxide crystals across the skin's surface through a sealed tube. A sterilised hand piece almost simultaneously vacuums them off, taking layers of dead skin with it. According to Sean, it can be used to treat unsightly skin blemishes and acne scarring, but can also be used to less dramatic effect as a rigorous springtime scrub.

It was a bitch of a day the day I went for my treatment, rain falling on Mayfair's elegant streets as if a tap the size of the Atlantic Ocean had just been opened over Wimpole Street. Once inside the cosy interior of the Freedom Health clinic (a roaring fire, comfy armchairs and well-thumbed copies of *Interiors* magazine) I was led to the surgery by my clinical aesthetician, Lee. Therapist would be a better word to describe Lee, whose chair-side manner is impeccable. Of the 40-odd minutes the treatment takes, Lee spent 10 reassuring me and talking me gently through the process. He then led me to a dentist-style chair and carefully placed pads across my eyes to avoid any damage. Microdermabrasion is very effective for the elimination of crow's feet, but the fine dust it can create necessitates protection of the eyes. Lee had warned me that treatment of the sensitive skin area around the eyes might prove to be the most uncomfortable part of the procedure, though, in the end, it amounted to little more than a vigorous rub – either Lee has expert hands or I have a high pain threshold.

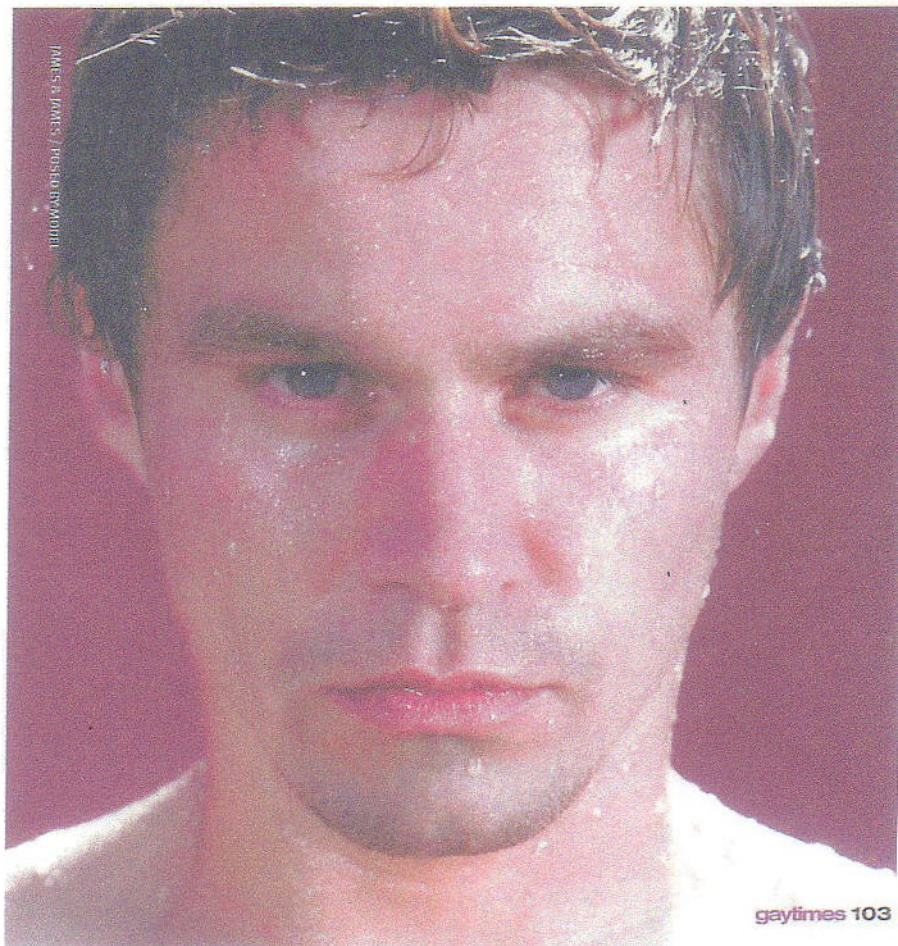
Once blindfolded, I could lapse into a somnolent state (though the sound of the equipment did cause mild concern – rather like a small generator) and relax in a semi-horizontal position as he dragged the vacuum system across my face. Certain parts require a more aggressive touch – the area around the nostrils, the periocular (crow's feet) and perioral (around the mouth and upper lips) proved tougher than the *glabella* (frown wrinkles) or smile wrinkles on my cheeks – but I can say none of it actually hurt. Lee does recommend a course of treatments over a period of several months, depending on the extent of facial tissue damage (acne scarring, for example, would require a longer and more intense treatment) but if you have a big occasion coming up, a single session can suffice to give you a fresh-faced glow.

My favourite part of the treatment came after the vacuuming. Having sucked up a couple of layers of dead skin, Lee applied an ice-cold Aloe Vera face mask, a rather heavy gelatin Commedia Del' Arte-style mask which contains green tea. This he used to gently massage my face and soothe away any initial soreness, and, alone, it's worth the price of the treatment. The whole process is designed not only to remove dead skin but stimulate the skin cells and collagen for healthy regrowth. Lee told me I should notice a difference in a couple of days and recommended that I wash with simple warm water and avoid harsh soap-based grooming products.

So, as I wandered back onto the streets of Mayfair, rain streaming down my newly polished face, I felt, paradoxically, sunburnt. In my impatience to retrieve my fast disappearing youth, I was hoping to have lost at least a year by the time I reached the nearest mirror. In reality, Lee was right; it took a few days before people began to comment how fresh I looked, and suspiciously asked me if I'd had cosmetic surgery. ■

Microdermabrasion costs £115 for face and £150 for back or chest treatment. Call Freedom Health on 020 7323 9007 for further information on this and other treatments

FACE OFF



JAMES JAMES / ROSE BROWNE