

One shot Wonder

Can one session of **Bio-Alcamid** restore the parts other fillers can't reach? Robert Fieldhouse investigates...



Over the past few months many people have shared very positive personal experiences with me about their use of a facial filler called Bio-Alcamid. They all reported the same reassuring result, that they only needed one or two sessions to fill out depleted cheeks and temples. The extra benefits were that it was long-lasting and pretty easy to implant.

What is it?

Bio-Alcamid or polyalkamide is a biopolymer, made mostly of water. It's stable and non-toxic and can be injected into the face, the bottom of the feet, buttocks or anywhere where fat is depleted. It forms a soft gel replacement for lost fat and its manufacturer says it should not degrade or move.

At £975 per 5ml syringe it costs more than its main competitor, New-Fill, but it should require fewer sessions to achieve and maintain the desired effect, and can be used in cases of the most extreme facial wasting.

Bio-Alcamid has been used in Europe for cosmetic and restorative procedures for several years. Several studies in HIV negative people in reconstructive and cosmetic surgery have conducted in Europe showing positive and lasting results.

An offer we couldn't refuse

Recently London-based Dr Séan Cummings agreed to carry out the procedure free of charge for one of his patients with severe facial wasting to enable *Positive Nation* and our readers to see how beneficial Bio-Alcamid can be. The patient, Steve, rather bravely agreed to have the whole process recorded and reported by us.

Steve is a long-term survivor. He was diagnosed back in 1984 and started anti-retroviral therapy in 1993. He's used all the nukes we now know are most implicated in the development of body fat loss. He spent three years on AZT (zidovudine), followed by treatment with d4T (stavudine) alongside protease inhibitors.

"I've been on treatment for 13 years but it's only in the last three or four that the facial wasting has become really noticeable, I've also lost fat all over my body, particularly on my legs and buttocks". Steve now takes the protease inhibitor lopinavir-ritonavir with tenofovir and abacavir.

No access to a valid treatment

Steve discussed his wasted appearance with his HIV doctor in January this year. "They gave me a copy of a feature in *Positive Nation* on facial wasting to read but

couldn't offer me access to any treatments. I live in one of the wealthier parts of Berkshire, and I know patients treated at Ealing who have had other similar procedures.

"I tried to get funding from my local HIV clinic and also my local GP. But I got a letter back from Berkshire PCT saying they didn't class it as a priority, they class it as cosmetic surgery. My HIV doctor said my facial wasting was just the result of ageing.

"It's not a nice feeling when you don't feel you are being taken seriously. The hospital said that I'm the only person who has asked for it. I cannot believe that."

Steve has never had any other facial fillers in the past, making him an ideal candidate for treatment with Bio-Alcamid.

Steve's partner, Chris, said: "Although Dr Cummings has been extremely kind to donate his professional services for free on this occasion, we are still urging the PCT to recognise this as a valid treatment and make this procedure available to people locally who don't have Dr Cummings to take care of them. I told you must go back to your HIV doctor and show him the results. This may help to change the view of the PCT."

Before the consultation with Dr Cummings, Chris showed me some holiday snaps of Steve

taken some years ago. The difference in Steve's facial appearance was staggering. His demeanour on the day of the consultation was of someone wholly fed up with his lot. "I'm not happy with the way I look. Sometimes I don't want to go out."

Dr Cummings said this was not uncom-

uct to be applied to healthy tissue and not fat depleted skin; I don't think it sits very easily in fat-depleted skin. You also tend to develop lumps. However, my experience may be biased as I tend to see lots of men coming in to have Bio-Alcamid because they are dissatisfied with New Fill."

injections, and about 30-40 minutes, one side of the face was done. Dr Cummings pressed and molded the injected fluid to the form of Steve's face. He then massaged the area to reduce swelling from injection site reactions. In total, the doctor injected about 4.5ml of Bio-Alcamid into one side of Steve's face.



"People said Steve looked 10-15 years younger. Some of the women at work asked for the doctor's number"

mon: "When people first come and see me they don't smile much, but when it's done they are *really* smiley."

Bio-Alcamid vs New-Fill

Dr Cummings has a wealth of experience in general practice and, in more recent years, private practice in the various procedures used in facial reconstruction in Aids. His belief is that Bio-Alcamid is the product to beat.

"I've been using Bio-Alcamid for facial wasting since late 2003. I've treated several hundred patients. The main competitor New-Fill was designed as a cosmetic prod-

The procedure

Dr Cummings carefully explained in detail each step and reassured Steve he was going to look terrific. "We start with the cheeks and later do the temples. Sometimes there is a little bit of asymmetry." He began by applying iodine to the face and then injected the anaesthetic inside Steve's mouth and into Steve's face. It soon numbed his face.

Dr Cummings carefully felt the hollows of Steve's face that required treatment with Bio-Alcamid. The needle was large: 16 gauge, "like a nail really". He pinched the skin and injected the liquid very slowly. After a few

From top left: Steve before the treatment; Dr Séan Cummings injects anaesthetic into Steve's face to numb the area then fills the hollows with Bio-Alcamid; Dr Cummings massages Steve's face to reduce swelling before repeating the procedure on the other side of Steve's face

With half the face done, Steve sat up in the chair. The results were astounding, the hollow on the right side of his face was most definitely filled, but Steve was too apprehensive to look at this early stage. The doctor continued to restore the appearance of the other side of the face using the same procedure: iodine, anaesthetic, Bio-Alcamid and then sculpting.



Left: Steve just after the Bio-Alcamid treatment; Dr Séan Cummings talks through the changes with Steve's partner, Chris

Below; a week later, the swelling has subsided and Steve could not stop smiling. "I've noticed a great improvement in his confidence," said Chris

► Afterwards, Steve was given a day's worth of antibiotics and acyclovir to prevent any fungal outbreak.

What a difference a week makes

I met up with Steve and Chris a week later at Dr Cummings' consulting rooms. This time Steve did not stop smiling. He told me the swelling had subsided within a couple of days and the only bruising was a slight yellowing of the skin at the injection site.

Chris said: "It's been quite a week; people have been asking Steve what's happened. He just told them he had just shaved off his goatee beard. People said he looked 10-15 years younger. Most people were perplexed. Some of the women at work asked for the doctors' number."

"I've noticed a great improvement in his confidence. He even answers the telephone differently. This whole scenario has been a source of anxiety for months and months."

Dr Cummings was happy with the results too: "We have some bits to finish off; usually I wait for one or two months and then complete the temples and under the cheekbone, but I've hidden the bullet marks."

A Big Lottery bid

Dr Cummings has plans to apply to the National Lottery's Big Lottery Fund to try and get funding to provide Bio-Alcamid to more people.

"I'm arguing that this procedure should be regarded as a social and community project. "Last year we tried to put an ad for Bio-Alcamid in the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival brochure and they wouldn't carry it. They said it was inappropriate for their audience. I wrote to the chief executive and complained but got no reply. I'm rarely shocked but I really was shocked at that."

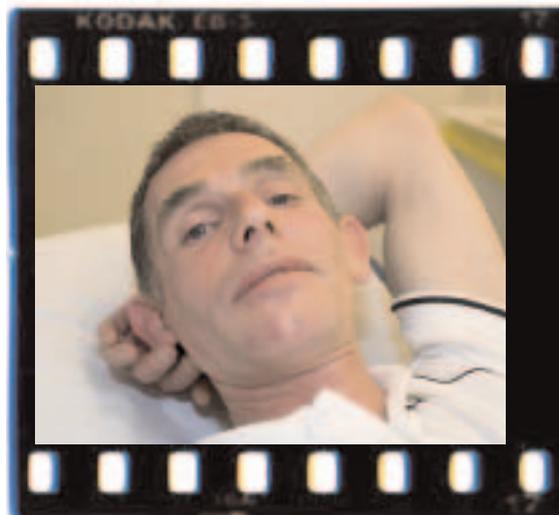


Final thoughts

While an increasing proportion of people with HIV are benefiting from Bio-Alcamid and other procedures for fat loss, the fact remains these products will only be available for the privileged few who have the cash or those who may be lucky enough to get onto a clinical trial.

Dr Cummings feels strongly about this: "No one would have the nerve to say to a woman who had her breast removed that she could not have a restorative procedure. Why should it be different with HIV? It's a very good treatment and the PCT should be funding it. I do not regard it as a cosmetic procedure. The problem at the moment is that many hospitals are broke."

Current treatment guidelines from the British HIV Association mention Bio-Alcamid, saying: "Long-term safety data are important, but this should not be used as an obstacle to treatment for patients requiring treatment now. A comparative study between these two agents (New-Fill and Bio Alcamid) is needed."



One thing is sure, such a study would be recruited before it was even designed. Meanwhile Bio-Alcamid raises the standard for lasting results in restoring fat loss that will lead to a better quality of life. **PN**

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