



Photo by Jean Chung

A New Battle In War on Fat

A Manhattan doctor insists procedure melts away fat, but skeptics remain

In mesotherapy, combinations of drugs, vitamins or herbs are injected.

By Roni Rabin
STAFF WRITER

Dr. Marion Shapiro sits behind an ornate antique desk in an office suite that looks nothing like your doctor's office. Vintage Victorian beaded purses decorate one corner of the Manhattan office and a large oil painting of a life-size Adam and Eve hangs on one wall, an allusion to Shapiro's "if it was in the Garden of Eden, you can eat it" diet.

Until a few years ago, Shapiro was an emergency room doctor. Now she treats what many patients consider a matter of emergency - being overweight - with mesotherapy, a controversial procedure touted to melt fat away from trouble spots in 10 weekly \$500 sessions, thereby slimming patients down by several inches.

Shapiro, one of a small number of New York-area doctors offering the treatment, calls it "liposuction without the surgery." Women's magazines have dubbed it "Botox for the buttocks" because of claims it can smooth cellulite dimples.

But critics, among them physicians and consumer advocates, call it an unproven fad - one that will attract desperate people willing to spend thousands of dollars in their quest for a



Carolyn Buny, left, before trying mesotherapy and, right, after completing the treatments. She says she went from wearing a 16 dress size to a 10.



Newsday Photo / Julia Gaines

quick fix.

"If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is," said a skeptical Dr. Debra Jaliman, spokeswoman for the American Academy of Dermatology. "I'm

a cosmetic dermatologist, but I would hesitate. I like things that are tried and true, with science behind them."

Consumer advocates say the long-term safety of the technique

should be established before it becomes widely available.

"Huge numbers of people could be affected," said Lynn McAfee, director of medical advocacy with the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination, a non-profit organization that targets prejudice based on size. "We need a risk/benefit analysis. People see lots of benefits to losing weight, and they're not analyzing the risks."

But Shapiro said no adverse effects aside from skin irritations have been reported in Western Europe, where the procedure has been used for decades, though primarily for medical reasons including pain treatment. She said she has treated more than 1,000 patients without any problems.

The term mesotherapy refers to the technique of injecting medications in targeted areas just under the top layer of skin. When used for weight loss or cellulite reduction, it involves administering hundreds of small injections of a medicinal cocktail to targeted areas of the body, just millimeters under the skin.

Different doctors use different combinations of drugs and vitamins or herbs. The U.S. Food and Drug Admin-

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A New Conflict in the War on Fat

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istration does not regulate how physicians use approved medications, spokeswoman Sharon Snider said.

News reports say supermodel Elizabeth Hurley has traveled to England for the treatments and that movie star Catherine Zeta-Jones relied on it to get back into shape after childbirth.

But many doctors say its slenderizing effects have never been scientifically tested - that there is simply no proof it works.

Dr. Leroy Young, a plastic surgeon who chairs the emerging trends task force of the American Society of Plastic Surgery, said he did a thorough search of the medical literature and was unable to locate a single peer-reviewed study that found the treatments effective in clinical trials.

"If there was anything out there in the peer-reviewed journals, I'd believe it," he said. "There is no scientific proof. It's all anecdotal."

Shapiro says she was initially skeptical - but wound up "truly amazed at the results."

Carolyn Buny, a 53-year-old patient from the Bronx, was amazed, too. She turned to Shapiro last summer after trying diet after diet in an attempt to lose 30 pounds gained after she quit smoking. Buny said she didn't stick to Shapiro's recommended diet, nor did she exercise regularly. She wound up losing only 5 pounds - but went from wearing a 16 dress size to a 10. And she fits into jeans she wore when she was 20 pounds lighter.

Shapiro said such results are not unusual. That's because the procedure targets fat in a specific area, not all over the body, so a small amount of weight loss is very visible.

"A pound of fat is like four sticks of butter," she said. "Imagine me melting



Photo by Jean Chung

Dr. Marion Shapiro, above, says mesotherapy can melt away pounds of fat at a time. <http://www.mesodoc.com>

four sticks of butter from your stomach - you lose a lot of inches, even though it's only one pound."

Buny focused primarily on her 'spare tire' and, according to measurements taken in Shapiro's office, lost almost six inches around her waist, two and a half inches around the abdomen at the belly button and three inches from her hips.

"It was my anniversary gift from my husband - just to fit in clothes again," she said.

Before undergoing mesotherapy, "I couldn't see my feet. My belly was out to here, like when I was pregnant," she said, motioning to illustrate.

The only side effect she experienced was bruising, which Shapiro had warned her about, Buny said.

Several papers published in medical journals have also reported skin irritations from the treatments. Shapiro said such problems may result from non-sterile conditions.

Carol Bernaola gained 75 pounds, during pregnancy, and though she lost most of the weight, she wanted help

eliminating a few trouble spots and cellulite. She opted for mesotherapy over liposuction to get down to her pre-pregnancy weight of 110.

"I feel like I found a new religion," said Bernaola, of Hoboken, a 27-year-old former Playboy playmate who reached her goal in six sessions.

Shapiro studied mesotherapy in France, where it is taught in medical schools and used for medical treatment, including pain relief, as well as for cosmetic purposes. In June 2002, she opened an office in West Orange, N.J., and recently opened another on Madison Avenue. So far, she said, she has treated more than 1,000 people, men as well as women, with no adverse effects.

The physician who trained her, Dr. Jacques Le Coz, said in a brief telephone interview that he is now training 10 American physicians a month. But Le Coz, who is president of the French Society of Mesotherapy, said he uses the technique primarily for pain relief, not cosmetic or aesthetic applications.

"It's a big deal in the U.S. for reducing fat," Le Coz said. "For aesthetics, it can help people. But when someone in the U.S. is told it can reduce the fat, reduce the weight, by 30 kilos [66 pounds], it's not true, because mesotherapy reduces the volume but not the weight."

Shapiro acknowledges mesotherapy is not a cure-all for obesity. She does not advise the procedure for people more than 50 pounds overweight. And she does not accept patients who are pregnant, have heart disease, are insulin-dependent or recovering from stroke or cancer treatment. "Your health comes first; results come next," she said. She also won't accept children under 18 for treatment.

The treatment is not 100 percent effective; about 5 percent of her patients do not respond, she said, something

that is usually evident by the fourth session, "I tell every patient they could be in the 5 percent," she said.

All patients are asked to adhere to Shapiro's Garden of Eden diet - a high-protein, limited carbohydrate diet with no processed foods - and to exercise at least three times a week and drink plenty of water.

The treatment starts with a consultation and screening for allergic responses to the medicines that Shapiro uses.

The combination varies from doctor to doctor. Shapiro uses a mixture of aminophylline, an asthma medication, and plant extracts and vitamins intended to strengthen the skin and help distribute the medication throughout the skin's mesoderm layer. Aminophylline is the active ingredient, she said, and she uses a mechanical injection gun with tiny needles "the size of an eyelash" to deliver 100 to 150 injections rapid-fire to the targeted body area.

"The fat in the mesoderm layer gets melted away," she said of the process, explaining that the medication stimulates receptors on the cells to release the fat, and then breaks it down.

Young suggested aminophylline may work as a lipolytic, an agent that metabolizes fat by activating an enzyme system to cause triglycerides to break down into fatty acids that can be burned or moved somewhere else. "It's theoretically possible," he said.

The other U.S. physicians who perform mesotherapy don't use the same active ingredients, Shapiro said. And doctors in France use caffeine, which Shapiro eschews because it is a stimulant.

Consumer activists say they worry that as fat increasingly is met by social opprobrium, the temptation will grow to turn to quick weight loss programs that haven't undergone extensive testing for either safety or efficacy.

"People are getting more and more desperate," McAfee said.