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In search of a facelift without a knife — the rise of stem cell tourism

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Longevity clinics and medical spas are increasingly offering their own — often unsubstantiated — treatments. But do they work?

Kristiana Capati-Choquet is a travel agent based in New York who specialises in organising medical treatment trips for wealthy clients. These women fear being checked out by their peers for signs of ageing in holiday hotspots like St Barths or Courchevel. According to Capati-Choquet, the ultimate accolade is not a great tan or a new bag but rather being asked: “How do you look even younger this year?”

One such client is a New Yorker in her sixties. This woman has long roamed the world in search of the fountain of youth — or at least, cosmetic procedures that can mimic its effect. That glamorous pensioner’s latest obsession? Tasking Capati-Choquet with finding her the best place to go for a stem cell-based rejuvenation treatment, colloquially known as a “facelift without a knife”.

She’s already declined the chance to go to a Maldives resort that’s offering a particular kind of stem cell infusions. “They only had bone marrow cells, and she wants umbilical cord,” says Capati-Choquet.

First discovered in the 1960s, stem cells have become a medical buzzword over the past decade, touted for their near-miraculous abilities. These blank cells, which are often spun out of harvested fat or from bone marrow but can also be created in a lab from skin or blood cells, can then transform into other cells, helping to replace or regenerate damaged tissue or heal ailing joints from the inside out.

Beyond the best-known stem cell treatment — bone marrow transplants — they have also become an increasingly commonplace treatment for orthopaedics, with sports stars like Cristiano Ronaldo and Kobe Bryant touting their efficacy for injuries.

Today, there's an increasing interest around their cosmetic potential, too: could such Swiss Army Knife-like cells smooth out wrinkles with as much gusto as they ease an arthritic elbow? With minimal downtime and maximum effect, it would be a multibillion-dollar breakthrough for whoever could prove it worked. Around the world, longevity clinics and medical spas are increasingly offering their own — often unsubstantiated — stem cell treatments to improve the quality of clients' skin and health.

It's exactly those sorts of destinations that Capati-Choquet's client is interested in. But there is a snag. As Bay Area-based plastic surgeon **Dr Steven Williams**, the former president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, explains: "When we're talking about stem cells, it's an incredibly broad umbrella term."

While orthopaedic and PRP treatments are autologous, so use stem cells that have been harvested from someone's own tissue — think bone marrow or tooth pulp — the best cosmetic techniques available today tend to rely on allogeneic treatments, using Mesenchymal Stem Cells (MSCs) harvested from donors to achieve the most effective results. Because of this sourcing, but also because of possible immune complications and the cells' own unpredictable behaviour, treatments that use allogeneic MSCs are strictly regulated in clinical trials and not permitted for commercial uses in most countries (exceptions with looser rules include Mexico, the UAE and the libertarian enclave of Próspera in Honduras).

Used intravenously, stem cells are like puppies off leash in a park — well-meaning but impossible to control

Dr Steven Sampson, a regenerative medicine expert in Los Angeles who has treated biohackers such as Bryan Johnson, describes MSCs as "medicinal signalling cells" that create what's known as the paracrine effect, directly triggering behavioural changes in nearby cells in the body.

The ability for MSCs to mimic, or bolster, any cell lies at the heart of their current reputation as miraculous age-defying problem solvers for the super-rich. The same mechanism, however, makes them potentially dangerous. Studies are inconclusive, but there is a risk that MSCs treatments could proliferate an undetected cancer, for example.

Despite the potential risks, however, many patients and doctors are undeterred and treatments abound. Practitioners in the field emphasise that umbilical cord-derived cells are better for many reasons: they are less likely to trigger an immune reaction and often produce faster, more self-evident results.

Dr Anita Rajoo is a UAE-based doctor who specialises in integrative aesthetic and regenerative medicine, including MSC. She might use injectable treatments for, say, hyperpigmentation,

concentrating the effect of MSCs on the affected area. Typically, one such treatment requires four to six sessions at about \$1,000 per jab. Another way of using MSCs is to flood them through the body via an IV. “Intravenous infusion has additional benefits — trying to treat the skin, you get the hair benefits, because it’s treating you as a whole,” she explains. This other procedure can only take place once per year thanks to the inflammatory response it typically triggers and costs about \$50,000.

Such a process, though, is much less predictable, as it unleashes those cells on the whole body. “If someone wants it for a beauty purpose, you cannot programme it to function that way — there’s no way we have control over where it’s going to go,” says Dr Rajoo. Those stem cells, in other words, rush through the body and decide autonomously what most needs their assistance. Put simply, think of the stem cells in that scenario like puppies off-leash in a park — well meaning, perhaps, but impossible to control. And here lies another issue with MSCs — unpredictability.

Rajoo had a 54-year-old patient who came in for joint problems, mostly osteoarthritis on his knees; he underwent both that system-wide IV, an infusion of about 100mn MSCs, plus some injections into his knees. At a check-up six weeks later, he was thrilled that those knees seemed much better. There had been side effects, though. “He was a bald man, and he had hair growth, which he hadn’t had for 10 years,” she says, “He asked me, ‘What did you do?’”

The benefits these MSC treatments provide are also not always those intended — at one clinic, a patient’s Botox dissolved after the infusion. SHA Mexico, the wellness clinic near Cancún, offers stem cell treatment for cosmetic reasons, but aesthetic lead Dr Ivan Wong says it’s vital not to mix and match rejuvenating treatments. If a patient undergoes microneedling, or another procedure that deliberately creates microlesions, to try to shock the skin into action, an infusion of stem cells might neutralise the benefits, rushing to repair the intentional disturbance before they can trigger the hoped-for response.

“They’re looking for cells sending out signals for assistance, so they go to the body and fix whatever needs repair first,” explains Dr Ebenezer Abel Paul, another MSC-treating doctor in the UAE. If you’ve got an undiagnosed heart condition, for example, they’ll prioritise that over any wrinkle, however furrowed.

Booking a trip to a clinic in Dubai to undergo that would-be miracle treatment isn’t perhaps as straightforward as the jet-setting one-upmanship might imply. The fragmented, international landscape for the protocol makes it almost impossible to verify exact data, and so, perhaps, Dr Michael Zemel puts it best. He’s the chief scientific officer at life science consultancy Kinexum in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

“I think the fair warning is this: it’s not that this can’t work — it can, and it does,” he says. “It’s that we don’t know the frequency of it working wrongly.”

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