

VOGUE

JUNE

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**LAURA
BUSH**

By Julia Reed

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smooth operator

Can the much-hyped laser really render you hair-free forever? Treatment veteran Elizabeth Hayt shares a few words to the wise.

It started out casually enough. One afternoon last August, Brad Katchen, M.D., a New York dermatologist, asked me to drop by his office. We had been friends for about a year. Wearing Helmut Lang from head to toe, gentle and understanding about all things female, he's the kind of guy I knew I could confide in about my problem. (Probably the reason the Sex and the City girls-his patients-adore him, too.) He suggested we give it a beauty ▶ 152

BOOT LEG: LASER HAIR REMOVAL MIGHT GIVE YOU THE CONFIDENCE TO BARE ALL. BOOTS, CALLAGHAN. DETAILS, STORES, SEE IN THIS ISSUE. PHOTOGRAPHED BY RAYMOND MEIER. SITTINGS EDITOR: ELISSA SANTISI

a try, reassuring that I was just the right type-fair-skinned and brunette. He promised I wouldn't regret it. Oh, how he was right.

and so began my love affair with laser hair removal, a relationship that endured for eight months. On seven occasions, I schlepped from my uptown apartment to Katchen's SoHo office, where I sprawled across the examining table. The 20-minute session began when the doctor and I donned Sleeper-style goggles to protect our eyes from the laser beam before he slathered my freshly shaven underarms and bikini area with a goopy blue gel chilled to goose-flesh-inducing-temperature in order to counteract the machine's heat. Then I offered up my body parts to the laser's sting, which felt like a rubber band snapping against my tender skin. Afterward, when I left the office, I was grateful that my clothes covered up the mottled patches of temporary redness. But compared with the alternative-molten wax ripped off my flesh for a mere week's worth of smoothness followed by ingrown hairs and stubby regrowth that made me feel like a monkey before I started the process all over again-laser hair removal was a dream.

Not that I didn't have my doubts. Katchen had warned that because hair grows at different rates-hormonal changes, genetics, and the specific area of the body all determine when and how fast hair sprouts-it would take at least three treatments to do the trick. Because we had swapped my writer's fee for his laser finesse (I wrote a skin-care pamphlet for his new SkinCareLab, a luxury spa above his dermatology office), I was spared the bill of at least \$500 per session. (Granted, that's pretty much the same price as my Manolo habit, but I can't say that I indulge in a pair a month!) Had I paid for the treatments and known in advance that they would have ultimately tallied about \$3,500, I'm not sure I would (or could) have forked over that much dough to remedy a problem lacking guaranteed perfect results. In addition, I wasn't prepared for the long-term commitment that laser treatments required and resented the fact that my hair was more resilient than I realized.

"This isn't working," I complained at my fourth appointment, pointing to my inner thighs and lifting my arms above my head. "Look, there are still little goatees where the sun doesn't shine."

"Oh, come on," Katchen encouraged me. "Considering how much you started with, you now have only countable hairs!"

Well, not exactly. But by the sixth treatment, he was right. The dark sprigs had thinned into nothing more than stray hairs. The laser had knocked out 80 percent of my crop-which specialists consider an excellent result. "It's very difficult for a laser to pack enough punch to get rid of the hair follicle permanently with just one treatment," said Washington, D.C., dermatologist Tina Alster, M.D., explaining why multiple treatments are required. "I liken hair removal to weeding your garden. If you do it only one time, chances are most of those weeds will return. That's probably due to the fact that you missed or overlooked some that are resistant or some that don't get pulled out

from the root. Hair is similar. You have to treat it a few times to see permanent reduction."

Note Alster's emphasis on "reduction." In 1996, the government approved lasers for permanent hair removal, but "permanent"-according to FDA standards-doesn't mean nary a hair forever more. It means merely eradicating the unwanted tufts for longer than six months. However, Katchen confirmed that his patients have experienced at least a two-year reduction in hair regrowth, and New York dermatologist Patricia Wexler, M.D., lasered off the hair on her arms two and a half years ago and now has only a fine fuzz that requires an occasional zapping. To improve the results, some doctors prescribe Vaniqa, a new hair-removal cream that costs about \$50 and works like Propecia, only in reverse. But the cream must be used every day for the rest of the patient's life to keep the hair at bay. In other words, sans Vaniqa and with laser treatments alone, there are no guarantees that I would remain hair-free.

Although there are currently five different types of lasers on the market-Ruby, Diode, YAG, Alexandrite, and intense-pulsed light source-as well as dozens of brands of machines, like Gentle-LASE and LightSheer, all operate according to the same basic

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principle: A light source is used to radiate the hair follicle, thus destroying it but not the surrounding skin, thanks to the barrier gels or the machines' cryogen-spray devices or chilled-tipped hand pieces. Any part of the body can be treated, from legs to arms to nipples to the backs of fingers and toes, as well as the face, though doctors recommend avoiding the eye area. Although the fear of looking like a wolf woman has driven plenty of females to seek out laser removal, there are even guys who undergo the

treatment in order to shed the fur that may be growing on their backs. Lasers have an advantage over waxing and electrolysis in that they can be used to treat larger swaths of unwanted hair quickly and with less pain (though they are expensive, costing anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500 a session, depending on how many areas are treated. Electrolysis, by comparison, costs \$125 per hour, said Wende Silver, an Upper East Side electrologist, who estimated that the average client requires a year and a half of monthly

hair-raising

For those yet to brave the lasers beam, hair-growth inhibitors promise to make unwanted hair-think legs, arms, bikini, face, the whole enchilada-all but disappear. Recommended to be used in conjunction with a regular hair-removal regimen (whether waxing, lasers, or razors), topically applied treatments like the prescription-only Vaniqa (the sole inhibitor approved by the FDA) work to decrease cell multiplication in the hair follicle, resulting in slower and sparser growth over time. But hairlessness doesn't come cheap: "Treat this stuff like caviar," New York dermatologist Deborah Sarnoff, M.D., says of the \$50-a-tube preparation. And be sure to stock up: -It does work, but its a maintenance thing;" admits Miami dermatologist Fredric Brandt, M.D. "To see results, you have to use it twice a day, every day" Less expensive, over-the-counter alternatives include Jergens Naturally Smooth Shave Minimizing Moisturizer, which claims to refine and reduce the appearance of body hair, as well as Marzena Hair Remover Lotion with Inhibitor, a depilatory cream that promises lasting results.

-REBECCA RESNICK

one-hour treatments, totaling anywhere from \$1,500 to \$2,500, to deforest a bikini line. These results, however, are permanent).

But not everyone is a candidate for laser hair removal. Those with the greatest contrast between hair and skin color are ideal, which means that Caucasians who are natural blondes or redheads, or have white or gray hair, may benefit less from the treatment while brunettes

with fair, untanned skin get the best results.

"A light is shined on the skin, but it's absorbed only where there's pigment," said laser dermatologist Melanie Grossman, M.D., explaining how the laser works. "Think of how a dark car or dark shirt on a sunny day gets really hot. The light turns to heat, and the heat is located only where there's a pigmented hair. That's the way the laser selectively destroys the target."

Newer lasers, however, can zero in even on dark-haired, dark-skinned types. Robert Guida, M.D., an Upper East Side plastic surgeon, has been using a machine called Lyra since last summer, and he says that since then, he has developed a large following of African-Americans seeking laser hair removal. In addition, the machine is the first and only FDA-approved treatment for razor bumps, a condition afflicting black skin in particular.

Anyone who has read the advertisements inside a public bus or in the backs of magazines these days has probably realized that the proliferation of laser hair-removal centers is to the new millennium what Korean nail salons were to the late eighties. But just because a manicurist is qualified to wield a cuticle clipper doesn't mean she should pick up a laser. The regulations for the practice of laser hair removal vary from state to state. For instance, in New Jersey the procedure must be performed by a physician, whereas in Connecticut and California it may be administered by a licensed health-care professional under the direct supervision of a doctor; New York requires only that a doctor be at the facility. Dermatologists argue that their knowledge of skin and ability to diagnose and treat hormonal problems that may cause abnormal hair growth, not to mention the complications that can result from laser hair removal, like pigment changes, blistering, and scarring, make them better qualified than non-

physicians to perform the procedure. David J. Goldberg, M.D., J.D., a dermatologist and lawyer in both Manhattan and New Jersey, advises that anyone interested in laser hair removal ask the practitioner at least the following questions: How long have you been doing this? Who supervises you? And do you use one machine for everyone? (Remember: Not all lasers can treat dark skin.)

motwithstanding the various disappointments of laser hair removal, Katchen said that it is growing in popularity. Though not nearly as booming as requests for Botox, the current demand represents about 10 percent of his practice, about twice as much as in 1998, and appeals to younger as well as older patients. Wexler, who confirmed

similar numbers for her own practice ("It's for people who've had all the Botox and fat injections they need and are now bored," she joked), championed its pluses. "One does have more confidence when the mustache is sported by your date," she said. "For women used to tweezing hairs on the lips and chins, laser opens up a wealth of time. It's light-years past electrolysis and waxing. Before laser, the hairs had to be long enough for waxing, and then you had to time it for when you were seeing that man in your life. Should you shave the hair and start over? Laser has been incredibly liberating."

Patients agree. For years, Karen Ferguson, a nurse at the Laser & Skin Surgery Center of New York, refused to wear a bathing



footnotes

What are smooth-as-silk legs without fabulous feet to match? "Fabulous feet" mean meticulously groomed toes, and a punchy shade of coral lacquer is the season's best bet. "Disregard the myth that coral is strictly for grandmothers in Palm Springs," says polish guru Ji Baek, owner of Manhattan's Rescue Aromatherapy Spa. "It's much chicer than just a pink or an orange." So now you've got a great pedicure, but how to keep it from peeling and chipping after a long weekend of beach parties and open-toe sandals? Bergdorf Goodman's BuffSpa has exclusively introduced Essie's TuffBuff polishes to address this problem. Silica and chelated calcium have been added to improve polish adhesion and eliminate (!) peeling and chipping, while vitamin E and panthenol combat the nail dehydration that wearing enamel can cause. The collection is rigorously edited to only six essential hues: four perfect, sheer neutrals ranging from pink to beige, and two great takes on red. -R.R.

suit at the beach. "Because of waxing or shaving, I'd get such horrible folliculitis or razor burns," she said. "I'd go into the water in my shorts. At the end of '99, I did my first laser hair-removal treatment, and then the following April, I did a touch-up. I had a fabulous result. A year later, I'm still hair-free. I just bought a hot-pink tankini. It has a bikini bottom, which God knows I would never wear until now."

After nearly a year of undergoing laser treatments myself, I think I'll be joining Ferguson at the beach this summer. My hair free days are finally in sight. I have always been nitpicky about my appearance and have never deigned to go strapless or slip into a swimsuit without first undergoing depilation. However, now that my skin is nearly as smooth as a seal's, I plan on breaking the waves without so much as a last-minute dollop of Nair.