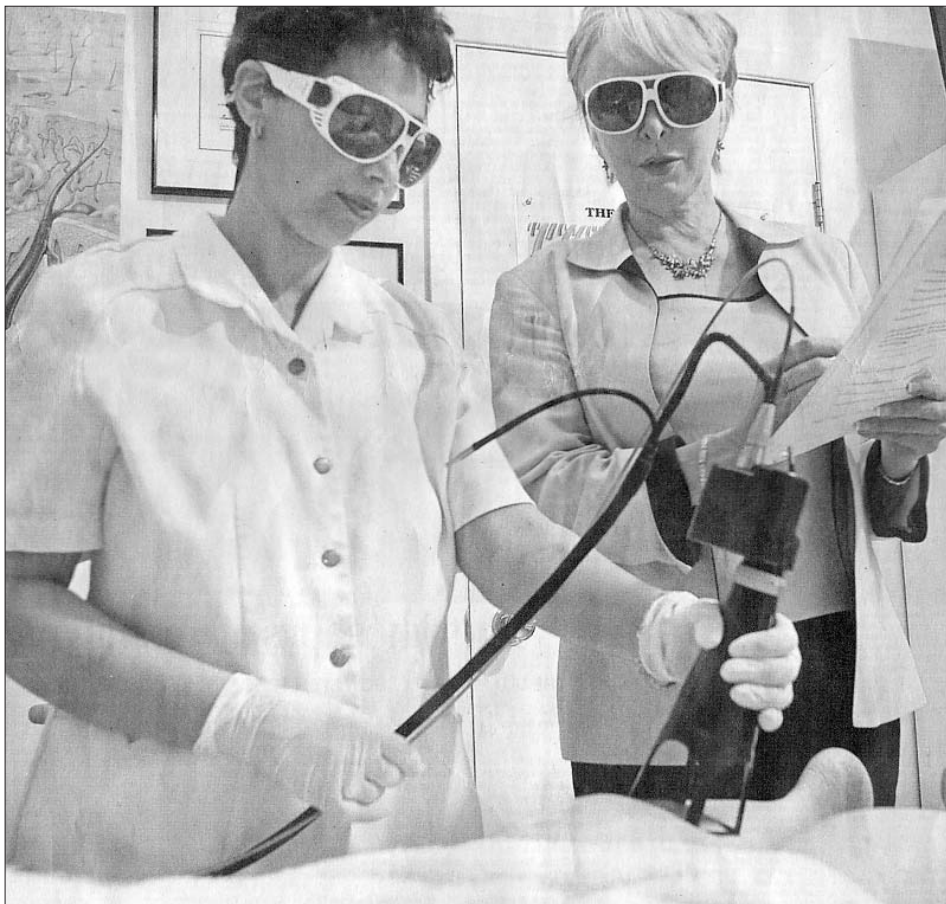


No razor, just a laser

Plenty of hair-haters are going under the beam



VINCENZO D'ALTO THE GAZETTE

Dermatologist Suzanne Gagnon supervises Raja Katir during laser hair-removal at Gagnon's clinic. "If you use the wrong machine for the skin type, the person will get burned," Gagnon says.

SUSAN KELLY
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Leonora Sharp got burned. Literally. Which is not what she expected when she decided to give laser hair removal a try.

All those ads made it sound so quick. Not to mention easy and painless. And her Internet

research reassured her that any side effects were "rare," "negligible" or "slight and temporary."

Still, the 41-year-old computer analyst wanted to play it safe. So she went to the hushed, stylishly clinical office of a cosmetic surgeon. She never got to see the doctor, but the nurse who performed the procedures assured her that all those pesky unwanted

follicles would be gone in as few as six treatments, certainly no more than eight.

"She didn't explain much," said Sharp, "beyond that it wouldn't hurt much. That I'd feel only a slight tingling, like rubber bands snapping on my skin." Those promises held true while the head of the laser machine was passed over her underarms and bikini line.

Immediately after the treatment, however: "My skin felt like it was on fire," said Sharp. "It was excruciating, like a really, really bad sunburn."

Within a few hours, watery, oozing blisters appeared in the treated area, which eventually took 10 days to heal and left tiny scars.

It turns out the sunbathing she had indulged in the previous day was to blame. She was unaware that exposure to sun or any medication can cause photosensitivity are big no-nos before a laser hair-removal treatment.

Esthetician Gloria Kleinman reckons she is approached by companies wanting to rent or sell her the laser equipment twice a month or so. "After weighing all the pros and cons, I'm still not ready to jump on the bandwagon," she said. This despite the many claims of advanced and safe technology. And easy money to be made.

In Montreal, laser hair removal can cost as little as \$25 for one treatment of the upper lip area, and up to \$150 or more a session for larger areas.

For the past 20 years, Kleinman has run Institut d'Esthetique Gloria on Park Ave. It's a Mile End mainstay with women coming for everything from manicures to bikini waxes, with a specialty in electrolysis.

"The companies all offer one-day training sessions on the machines," she said. "I find it hard to believe that would be enough." Kleinman points out there are many things to be aware of, such as the sun sensitivity. And there are side effects, however minimal. The most common are light or dark spots, which usually disappear after a few weeks to several months. More sensitive skins may also become temporarily a little crusty.

LASER HAIR REMOVAL IS ON THE RISE, BUT IT'S NOT A COMPLETELY CAREFREE OPTION FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO BE HAIR-FREE. WORD TO THE WISE: ASK A LOT OF QUESTIONS, AND WATCH YOUR SUN EXPOSURE

One laser does not fit all



VINCENZO D'ALTO THE GAZETTE

Dermatologist Madeleine Gagnon (left) and assistant Raja Katir (right) during a session. If you have been in the sun or are on medications that include some antidepressants, antibiotics and acne inhibitors, the technician needs to know.

"Education is key," said Adam Zulfikar, vice-president of Platinum Equipment in St. Laurent, which distributes laser hair-removal machines. "If you really don't know what you're doing, you can burn anyone." His company provides one- or two-day training sessions on the machines it sells or rents.

"For most of today's machines, which are very safe, that is quite adequate," he said. But he also stresses they're intended to provide enough theory to get started, plus some hands-on time. After that, clients are expected to contact his company's in-house consultant if they need more information.

"And people getting laser hair removal should ask a lot of questions as well," he said.

Also, though electrolysis is "no picnic," Kleinman doesn't agree with some claims that laser hair removal is virtually painless. "Lasers sting, even when they don't burn." Most physicians promoting laser hair removal claim it all depends on one's tolerance to pain.

This esthetician has several clients who after one laser treatment returned to electrolysis because of it. And one 37-year-old woman, who preferred her name not be used, suffered second-degree burns to the back of her legs after a third laser hair-removal session recently.

In Quebec, no special license or training is required to operate a laser hair-removal machine.

"Laser technology is advancing all the time," said Suzanne Gagnon.

She and her sister Madeleine, both dermatologists for more than 25 years, are skilled in

cosmetic laser procedures, which include hair removal, working from their des Laurentides Blvd. clinic in Laval.

The clinic uses two laser technologies. In the latest advance, Intense Pulse Light (IPL) laser, the one most frequently used for facial cosmetic rejuvenation, combines with radio frequency. IPL heats the skin, and the radio frequency penetrates to dislodge the hair root. It's gentle and effective, and the only laser solution for people with pale complexions and light hair.

People with darker skin might need a different laser. And there are many to choose from, such as the

YAG, or yttrium-aluminum-garnet, a versatile laser also used in eye surgery and facial resurfacing. The Alexandrite laser, in use since 1997, also comes in handy for such procedures as permanent makeup or tattoo removal. As are diode lasers, used mostly for hair removal but sometimes also for treatment of leg veins.

"If you use the wrong machine for the skin type, the person will get burned. It takes training and expertise to know which laser is right," Gagnon said. "If I feel a patient will get a better result with a type of laser I don't have, I will refer them to another clinic."

The biggest risk is posed by sun exposure. As Sharp learned, it can put you at risk for being burned by the laser, according to Gagnon. "This just doesn't mean tanning on the beach," she said. People are often unaware how many UV rays they soak up doing simple gardening in the backyard or going for a long walk.

Always inform the technician if you have been exposed to any sun or are taking any photosensitizing medications. The list of these is long and includes some acne-inhibiting drugs and some anti-inflammatory, antibiotic or antidepressant drugs.

At the Gagnons' clinic, you will fill out a detailed questionnaire to determine if you're an appropriate candidate. The initial examination and subsequent laser hair-removal procedures are left in the hands of a doctor-supervised technician. This person has undergone training with the laser machine company and a

minimum six-month supervised internship at the medical clinic.

"Laser hair removal is quite safe and harmless in general, though," Gagnon said. "It's important to have an experienced person doing it, however. When in doubt, do ask a lot of questions."

For instance:

Will it damage my skin?

What kind of results can I expect, given my hair and skin colour?

Will it hurt?

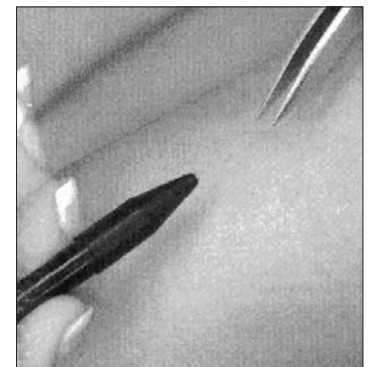
How many treatments before I see an improvement?

And finally, how much will it cost?

If you're not happy with the answers, find someone who will answer questions to your satisfaction.

Most patients find the speed and convenience of laser hair removal worth a little discomfort in any event. "But people should also be aware we can only guarantee a permanent reduction in hair," Gagnon said. "Results do vary."

As for Sharp: "I did go back, don't ask me why," she said. "I guess I just really wanted to get rid of that hair."



RICHARD ARLESS JR. THE GAZETTE

Electrolysis, as performed by esthetician Gloria Kleinman, who isn't a convert to lasers yet: "Lasers sting, even when they don't burn."

She waited one month for the burns to heal, then went back for four more sessions, at \$150 per, spread over seven months. "The other treatments were very bearable, much less painful and certainly faster than electrolysis," she said.

"The hair has been virtually eliminated in both areas, with no re-growth in the two years since I had it done."

Did you get burned? Don't just sit and simmer. Lodge a complaint with Quebec's Office de la protection du consommateur. You can also conduct a search to see if a place at which you're contemplating having laser hair-removal done has any complaints on record: www.opc.gouv.qc.ca, or call 1-(888) 672-2556.