



Caitlyn Jenner has been the subject of much media attention over the past few years for her high-profile gender transition

Transgender gap

Elaine Stoddart discusses the need for expert electrolysis to support transgender clients

Gender dysphoria is a condition where a person feels trapped within a body of the wrong gender. Many live unhappily with this for years and feel they have no option other than to eventually change gender. It is not a lifestyle choice and has nothing to do with sexual orientation (indeed many become lesbian, gay or heterosexual following the transition, as their sexual preferences may remain the same). One of my very dear trans friends, who has been married for 40 years, officially transitioned 10 years ago and remains happily with her wife who is her best friend. Unfortunately, loved ones are not always so supportive and the journey for a trans person can be a lonely one.

The average age of transitioning in the UK is 42 years old. Hair growth at this age often produces a high percentage of grey or white hairs, thus leaving electrolysis the only option for hair removal as laser/IPL cannot successfully treat white or grey hair. Hormone therapy often assists with the lessening of bodily hair but for facial hair, which tends to be dense and strong, electrolysis is recognised as the most effective treatment.

A trans client may require hair removal on all areas: face, body and genital area. Not all trans elect to have SRS (sexual reassignment surgery) but many do and depending on the surgeon and exact nature of the operation, hair removal on the scrotum may be required. It is necessary to liaise with the surgeon to ensure that the exact, specific area targeted for surgery is treated and not additional areas of skin which can then leave 'tell-tale' scars visible.

According to a 2016 trends report by Professional Beauty, hair removal has seen the biggest increase in revenue share of any sector in the beauty industry, growing by six per cent to £250m in 2015. Electrolysis/laser treatments increased from 20.9 per cent in 2014 to 22.6 per cent in 2015. Part of this market is the trans community. It is estimated that one in 4,000 people in the UK is receiving medical help for gender dysphoria and these numbers are growing. This is partly due to greater consumer awareness resulting in trans people becoming more socially acceptable and therefore a larger

number of gender dysphoric clients are being identified or are actively seeking help. Sadly, while public awareness is growing, true public acceptance can still lag pitifully behind. This is why competent electrolysis happy to treat trans clients with dignity and sensitivity are in great demand.

The business benefits are huge. Due to the extensive areas to be treated, a trans client will usually require many hours of treatment over a long period. Hundreds of hours spread over a two to three-year period is not unusual. Re-growth may be strong and fast and this necessitates a relatively large amount of treatment per week to make any progress. Two hours or more per week initially is not uncommon.

Furthermore, trans clients are the most reliable, due to their motivation, and usually the most knowledgeable, having carried out extensive research prior to treatment. It is key that the electrolysis is not only highly experienced but also knows how to treat clients with dignity and sensitivity. Upholding their privacy is paramount at all times, to create a better understanding, reduce inequalities and make life better for the trans client. Retaining a professional, detached but supportive manner while offering understanding and sympathy is hard to achieve but is key to a good working relationship. Across one or two years, a trans client may well spend more time with you than a dear friend and boundaries have to be created to avoid an intense, needy, destructive or unhealthy relationship.

TIPS FOR THE TREATMENT ROOM

The following statements, presented in italics, have been written by a trans client of mine to help electrolysisists understand the unique needs of transgender clients to provide them the best possible service. Jenny is a highly intelligent, professional woman at the pinnacle of her career. She fully transitioned more than two years ago and has been taking hormone replacement therapy medication for four years. The one regret she has is that she did not start electrolysis for facial hair removal much earlier in her journey, which is not an

uncommon regret.

Gender transition is neither easy nor cheap with potential costs of over £60,000. Hormone therapy, psychiatric assessments, facial feminisation surgery, hair transplants and, of course, gender reassignment surgery all carry significant costs, with electrolysis probably the most expensive and time consuming treatment of all. Finding the right electrolysis is something taken very seriously.

The trans community is incredibly close knit with a prolific and effective communication network. Charitable and support groups such as GIRES and The Beaumont Society network throughout the country and may put clients in touch with electrolysis.

Choosing a practitioner

Before even making the first appointment, the potential client will have undertaken considerable research about you. This is likely to include word of mouth recommendations from other trans women, Google searches and reviewing online discussions, as well as checking your website for evidence that you are 'transgender friendly' and have the relevant training and experience. Therefore, you might find it useful to make sure you specifically state on your website that you are more than happy to see transgendered clients.

Certainly the trans client is often extremely knowledgeable and informed about the treatment. As a consequence, a good sympathetic electrolysis is considered 'gold dust' and the news spreads like wildfire.

Training and CPD is key. An awarding body qualification in electrolysis at NVQ Level 3 is the starting place and then thorough grounding and experience in electrolysis is the next step. The British Institute and Association of Electrolysis (BIAE) offers a transgendered training course, as does Sterex Electrolysis. These are not a mandatory requirement but will definitely help you understand the trans person's life journey and equip you with skills so that you are able to help and support them.

Making clients feel at ease

Because individuals start their electrolysis very early on in their transition, they tend to be very sensitive and unsure of themselves when you first meet, so here are some suggestions to help make them feel comfortable and safe.

Making the appointment

Their voice on the phone is unlikely to match their name. Try to avoid using gender specific titles and pronouns. If you are unsure, ask how they would like to be addressed.

Attending the appointment

When they arrive for their appointment they are likely to be feeling extremely sensitive about their appearance and will want to



To 'pass' as their gender of choice is of paramount importance to a transgender person, so facial hair removal is often the singular most important consideration

avoid interacting with anyone other than you. Remember that in order to have a sufficient length of hair for you to work with, they will not have shaved for a few days so they will be even more self-conscious. A good idea is to have a discreet waiting area away from the view of other customers and to minimise the number of staff, other than yourself, that they will deal with.

The consultation must cover how to cope with the hair growth. There is no point telling a trans person not to shave, as this will only alienate them and show a lack of empathy. Discussing the treatment plan is essential so that



PICTURES: COURTESY OF NIAMH BREWER

you are both in agreement. Sectioning the face off into four quadrants works well, (so that the original quadrant is reached again four weeks later, thus allowing generous healing time) as does spacing out treatment by treating just black hairs in a salt and pepper hair growth at one treatment and then the white or grey the next. Find a way that works for that individual.

In the treatment room

Given that many transgendered clients also wear hairpieces or wigs while their own hair grows out, one useful tip that will be noticed and appreciated is to provide a simple wig stand. These easily fold away and are inexpensive.

Treatment

Electrolysis is uncomfortable. To meet the specific needs of transgendered clients, significantly higher power settings may be required. Therefore, helping them to develop an effective pain relief strategy will be essential. Here is the approach that Elaine and I developed over the last few years, which other transgendered clients may find useful:

◆ *De-stress – turning up stressed is a sure fire way to ensure a painful session. Make sure you arrive early, are wearing something comfortable and then take a moment to relax with a magazine or book.*

◆ *Alcohol/coffee/chocolate – avoid alcohol the night before an appointment. A couple of glasses of wine may not seem much but the next morning they reduce your pain threshold. Equally, try to avoid coffee and chocolate, as stimulants also increase your sensitivity.*

◆ *Moisturise – a couple of hours before the appointment, slather on a water-rich moisturiser and let it soak in. Thoroughly moisturised follicles make needle insertion easier and also conduct electricity more effectively thus enabling a lower setting to be used.*

◆ *Generalised pain relief – a couple of painkillers half an hour before the appointment also helps ease discomfort. However, for people with a low pain threshold, topical pain relief is also likely to be needed.*

◆ *Topical pain relief – creams like EMLA and LMX4 are a godsend for electrolysis. [Author's note: EMLA can be purchased over the counter and contains five per cent lidocaine (active ingredient). Trans clients may be able to get their GP to prescribe*



this, or an alternative, but the client must source and apply the product, as electrolysisists are not insured to do this.] *The cream needs to be liberally applied a good hour prior to the appointment but then they swiftly lose their effectiveness unless they are properly occluded (covered with an air tight covering). A medical occlusion product like Opsite Flexifix can be cut to size. Both the creams and occlusion tape are expensive but more than pay for themselves by improving the speed of hair removal.*

◆ *Mind tips and tricks – mental attitude is a big part of pain management. Music can provide a focus on something other than the treatment. Another useful little trick is to encourage the client to slowly exhale while you are treating each follicle.*

In my experience the trans client always chooses thermolysis rather than blend method. This is because thermolysis takes one to 1.5 seconds per hair and blend takes five to six seconds, therefore a greater number of hairs can be treated in the session. Thermolysis is renowned for being slightly more uncomfortable than blend and high settings are required for an effective treatment. Using insulated needles reduces the erythema and oedema

caused by treatment, as it prevents heat rising up the needle to the surface of the skin and assists with comfort levels.

Embarking on the journey for just a small part of the way with a trans person is probably the most challenging but rewarding and inspiring experience you could ask for. I have had the pleasure of meeting some of the most intelligent, funny, courageous, sad, happy and inspirational people on their amazing life's journey and have been privileged and blessed to share, in a small way, their transformation.



Elaine Stoddart of Elaine Stoddart Clinics has busy, successful practices in Harley Street, Burnham, Southampton and Reading and is a renowned electrolysis expert, as the former Director of Education and PR for Sterex for 16 years. She has trained surgeons, doctors, nurses and electrolysisists in advanced electrolysis and pioneered and launched the first ever transgendered electrolysis course in the UK. Elaine has also appeared on BBC work place skills educational programmes. For more information on Elaine Stoddart clinics visit www.elainestoddart.com or email elaine@elainestoddart.com

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