

Male breast reductions on the rise

Plastic surgeons are operating on a growing number of men who require breast surgery. Ruth Hill discovers why.

DRUG ABUSE, obesity and hormones in food are being blamed for a rise in the number of men seeking breast reduction surgery.

Plastic surgeon John Masters' Wellington practice gets about one inquiry a week from men seeking treatment for breast development.

Nationwide, plastic surgeons carry out just under 200 male breast reduction operations each year.

While most cases are of unknown origin, known causes include anything that alters the balance of the male and female hormones, testosterone and oestrogen - obesity, disease, medication and use of alcohol, heroin and marijuana.

Masters says he recently treated a young Auckland man, who was "normal in every way", except for his heavy "pot" habit.

During his time in the United States on a training fellowship, Masters treated a 16-year-old client who came for his first consultation in a C-cup bra.

His oldest male breast reduction patient has been 64 and he has treated people from all walks of life, from businessmen to sportsmen.

Masters said around 66% of adolescent boys experienced some degree of breast budding during puberty due to hormonal fluctuations, but the problem was "self-correcting" for the vast majority.

Food additives, organic phosphate pesticides and hor-

mones given to livestock, could also be having an effect.

"It's something for the epidemiologists to look at, but without maligning the food additive industry in any way, it does make sense that if you are putting hormones in your food, it will have an effect."

Men with breasts suffer huge psychological stigma.

One client, a representative football player, had managed to avoid changing his shirt in front of his team mates for the past five years.



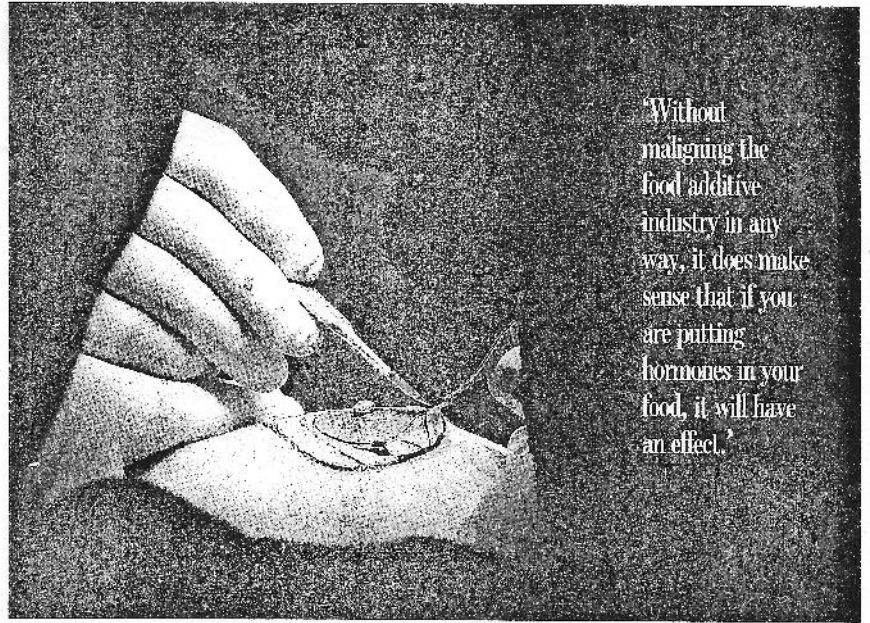
Before and after a breast reduction.

Hiding their "abnormality" dictates the clothes they wear, their recreational activities, their posture and even their love lives.

Some men found weight loss actually accentuated their breasts and so chose to be overweight to make their chests look smaller.

Some can be dealt with using a small excision and liposuction, while more "fibrous" glandular tissue needed more radical surgery.

Costs of the operations



"Without maligning the food additive industry in any way, it does make sense that if you are putting hormones in your food, it will have an effect."

range from \$5200 to \$10,500.

Male breast reduction was not covered by most health insurance plans and was not usually offered in public hospitals.

But Masters said the surgery was not about vanity.

"It's not about pleasing other people, it's about feeling good about themselves... dealing with something that is impacting negatively on their quality of life."

There was still a "stigma" around plastic surgery.

"One man hasn't even told his wife yet that he's thinking about it."

North Shore plastic surgeon John de Waal, who has done epidemiology studies for the New Zealand Foundation for Cosmetic Plastic Surgery, said it was not yet possible to say whether gynecomastia (male breast development) was increasing.

"The statistics we have are incomplete but most fulltime plastic surgeons probably do half a dozen a year, while others do significantly more."

Some general surgeons also perform male mastectomies for reasons such as breast cancer.

More and more men are going under the knife to reduce man-boobs.
Photo: Kevin Stant

I LOVED THE LIFE OF A HERMIT

FOR OVER 20 years Auckland man Paul* lived "the life of a hermit", turned down social invitations, worked long hours, wore baggy clothes and never swam. He also avoided intimacy with women, terrified of mockery and rejection. "Whereas most people would feel shy taking off their trousers, with me it was the opposite: I never took off my shirt."

Since developing breasts at 18, Paul managed his life around hiding them until, before Christmas, he sent a tentative email to plastic surgeon John Masters.

The only person in whom he confided was his sister, who drove him to Wellington and nursed him after the surgery. The day of his surgery was also his 45th birthday. Over the next few weeks, he told other family members what he had done. His father was "a bit shocked" at the price (\$9000) but then admitted he had suffered similar restrictions as a young man.

His younger brother thought he would have done something

about it years ago.

"I had never even discussed it with him... I thought I had hidden it so well," Paul says.

Paul says his self image was transformed by his breast reduction. "I had virtually lived the life of a hermit. But now, even with the scars, I've got no reluctance about disrobing. I never used to look at myself in the mirror."

However, after living so long with the stigma, he does not yet feel ready to share his story with everyone.

When someone asked about the scars recently, he just said he "had something removed".

"If I was blunt and said 'Oh, that's because I had my tits reduced', people would look at me strangely."

Paul regrets he didn't have surgery years ago. But he acknowledges plastic surgery was then not as accessible - or as acceptable.

"It's ironic that I was more concerned about what people would think when they found out I'd had plastic surgery."

* Not his real name.



Plastic surgeon John Masters.