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# Fair Enough?

Skin-lightening is potentially hazardous, politically charged and just plain sad. It's also a growth industry in Toronto

BY JAN WONG

**This past winter,** a subway ad for Liberty Clinic sparked much controversy when it proclaimed, "Get brighter and lighter skin!" It showed two women, one black and one South Asian, with digitally altered faces—pale on one side, dark on the other. Outrage ensued, and Liberty Clinic asked the TTC to yank the ads. They also swiftly apologized for any "concern, offence or distress the ads may have caused."

On their website, the clinic continued to use the photo of the South Asian woman, a Toronto-born model named Chinthiya Rajah, until they realized that it, too, would have to be yanked if they wanted to silence the uproar. Eventually, Rajah, whose family originates from Sri Lanka, stepped forward to deplore the whole notion of cosmetic lightening, telling the *Toronto Star,* "I'm not that dark and I'm not that light. I'm brown-skinned." Liberty Clinic apologized, again, but they haven't stopped offering the treatment.

And who can blame them? The global skin-whitening industry is estimated to hit $20 billion by 2018. In this, the world's most ethnically diverse city, where 49 per cent of us are visible minorities, some Torontonians wish to be a bit less visible. As a medium-beige person, I find it sad that dominant standards of beauty and success are so overwhelmingly white. But the yearning for lighter skin, while depressing, is not surprising. In most countries, even among people of the same race, lighter skin is associated with higher incomes, according to an American study published in 2014. Malcolm Gladwell, whose mother is Jamaican and father a white Briton, has written about the social advantages of growing up light-skinned outside Toronto.

I've never been hung up about my skin, perhaps because I grew up in the 1960s. Beauty magazines then praised a deep tan as healthy, not the precursor to melanoma. But in the 1970s when I studied in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, I discovered that, despite lip service paid to honouring workers, peasants and soldiers, the Chinese despised dark skin. As in every Asian, South Asian, Latin American and African country with agrarian roots, dark skin was undesirable because it signalled someone who toiled in the fields, someone poor, dirty and unsophisticated.

Nayani Thiyagarajah, a young Toronto filmmaker of Tamil heritage, has made a documentary on the subject titled *Shadeism: Digging Deeper.* "The preference for lighter skin has been around for ages," she says. "What's changed is the prevalence of products." And there's no shortage of them in Toronto. The city's ethnic grocery stores sell Unilever's Fair and Lovely for women, and Fair and Handsome for men—bestselling whitening creams in India and Pakistan. Some stores also illegally sell steroid creams over the counter, according to Amina Mire, a Somali-Canadian sociologist at Carleton University, whose research interests include "pigment sociology," the phenomenon of people with darker skin turning to dermatologists for non-medical reasons.

Scientists, who love to categorize things, have divided the human race into just six skin types. Back in 1975, a Harvard dermatologist named Thomas B. Fitzpatrick devised the sorting system based on sensitivity to ultraviolet light, and dermatologists have used it ever since. Type I are pale people with blond or red hair who always burn and never tan—think Emma Stone. Type II burn easily and tan with difficulty. Type III burn, but can also tan. Type IV are caramel—fast tanning, rarely burning. Type V are deep brown. And Type VI are darkest, like Lupita Nyong'o.

Benjamin Barankin, a dermatologist and founder of the Toronto Dermatology Centre on Bathurst Street, says he gets about one client a week requesting face lightening and one a month asking for a full-body treatment. He won't do full-body bleaching, which he says can't be done safely. But he does offer face-lightening regimens, which cost $350 to $1,000 depending on whether your insurance covers prescription creams. The treatment includes lasers, microdermabrasion, creams of Retin-A or hydroquinone, and chemical peels that strip out melanin. When prospective patients want to go a couple of skin types lighter, however, Barankin tells them it can't be done. "At most, I can fade them 10 to 30 per cent within their skin type. I tell them they won't get the degree of fading they want: 'Save your money, and focus on the things that are good in your life.' "

The day after we spoke, a young woman arrived in his office with pustules of acne

all over her face and neck. She had used an over-the-counter steroid lightener. Barankin emailed me a photo of a tube of the stuff. It promised "fast action," showed a drawing of a papaya and was labelled "0.05 per cent clobetasol." Barankin said that, in addition to causing acne, steroid creams in intense concentrations can suppress immune systems and lead to cataracts or glaucoma. Clobetasol is the strongest topical steroid on the market.

In the Distillery District, there's a clinic called AvantDerm that specializes in "ethnic dermatology." It was opened in 2011 by a doctor named Davindra Singh. When I contacted him, post–TTC brouhaha, he wouldn't answer any questions, except to say by email that he doesn't provide "generalized skin whitening."

Jean-Jacques Dugoua, the naturopath who runs Liberty Clinic, didn't return my calls, so I dropped by his Yonge Street clinic. His receptionist looked dismayed. She went to find him, then returned a moment later: Dugoua was too busy to speak to me—then, or any other day.

My search for a skin-whitening service finally landed me at Prayosha Salon and Med Spa in a Scarborough strip mall, where I decided it was best not to disclose my mission. Prayosha charges $14.99 for face bleaching and $79.99 for the full-body treatment, especially popular with brides. In the windowless basement, the beautician, whose own skin was acne-scarred, asked if I wanted just face or full body. When I hesitated, she dabbed a test splotch of chalky cream on my right hand. She wasn't checking for an allergic reaction—she wanted to demonstrate that the treatment worked. Instantly my skin prickled. A nasty odour, like bleach, filled my nostrils. I asked what was in the potion. "Minerals and vitamins," she said vaguely. "It's from Germany." She told me to wait seven minutes. As she disappeared up the stairs, she added, "You'll see—your skin will be whiter."

Alarmingly, the white smear seemed alive. First it morphed into a delicate foam, like miniature soapsuds. Five minutes later, it formed a small ring. When the beautician returned, she wiped my hand clean. "See? It's whiter," she said. I saw a damp, shiny circle, but was it lighter?

I decided to splurge on the full-body treatment. Once probably wouldn't kill me. Another beautician, Vaishali Bhalerao, in jeans and a zip-up sweater, showed me into a small, chilly room and instructed me to strip. I did as ordered and stood shivering, icy feet planted on a square of white paper. Bhalerao dipped a small paintbrush into a bowl full of odoriferous white cream. That's when I made my special request.

"Only half your face?" she said, sounding shocked.

She coated my neck, shoulders, chest, belly, back, buttocks, thighs, calves, the tops of my feet and, after some protest, only the left side of my face. My skin burned. Again I asked what was in the potion. This time the answer was: "Potassium and sodium and other minerals." The spa clock was broken, so Bhalerao asked me to time the treatment on my cellphone. After seven minutes for my face and 10 for my body, she swabbed me down with a hot towel. I scrutinized my face in the mirror above the sink. Unlike the TTC ad, I wasn't two-tone. I said nothing, and neither did Bhalerao.

In the taxi on the way home, I blurted out the treatment I'd undergone to the driver, who was wearing a Sikh turban. Harvinder Singh confessed that he, too, longed for lighter skin. We were on a six-lane stretch of Lawrence Avenue when I mentioned I'd only gotten half my face done. Singh whipped off his sunglasses, craned his neck around and stared.

"The right side?" he guessed.

Wrong.

Prayosha had advised me not to use soap for 24 hours, which I scrupulously obeyed. The salon promised the results would last for six weeks. But neither my bemused husband nor my friends could spot any difference between my left side and my right. A month later, I called the spa back and spoke to a manager named Kumud Patel. I told her I'd had the full body job—but only half my face. The whitening had failed. There was a pause.

"One time you won't see anything, honey," Patel said. "You have to come in four to six more times." =