

The art of 'restoring' a nipple

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In rebuilding breasts and self after cancer surgery, restoring a nipple might seem the least important element.

It isn't. Dr. Allen Rosen, a nationally known plastic surgeon based in Montclair, says, "For such a small organ, (the nipple) has a major impact on many levels: mothering, sexuality, who you are as a person. Returning that look and those functions, or a facsimile of them, to wholeness really can give the patient back her confidence, help her feel comfortable and whole again."

With photos displayed on a plasma screen in his office and through models and description, he sketches out this final step, as he does all the rest in reshaping and rebuilding breasts. The nipple tattooing usually is outpatient, he tells his patients, with or without anesthetic, depending on personal reaction and sensation in the rebuilt breast.

For each woman, Rosen maps out the nipple's size and shape, starting with a template. Then, crucially, he mixes the tattoo's colors, as much art as science. Then he sends his patient to Kristi Breen.

A cosmetologist and skin care specialist, Breen applies most of the tattoos in the Plastic Surgery Group in Montclair. Her formal title is "aesthetician," and in that role she carries out a range of duties: microdermabrasion (removing a layer of dead skin cells), chemical peels, camouflage makeup, waxing, eyelash extensions and permanent cosmetics. Tattooing falls in the last category; often, she says, it's the most satisfying.

End of the journey

"Here you're at the end of someone's journey," she says. "A lot of the time they're a little hesitant in the beginning, kind of awkward. Once they do it, they feel whole again. To me, that means more than anything."

Recreating the nipple itself, shaping it from a folded-in "star flap" or "bat wing" cut from nearby tissues, might seem the greater art. But the tattoo is most directly artistic, a kind of eye-fooling "trompe l'oeil" that adds detail and shadow as well as reproducing shape.

In tattooing a nipple, Breen tells her clients, matching shape and skin colors are crucial. From a large plastic tray filled with hardware and inks, she lifts out the template, a metal sheet cut with circles like a children's shapes plate from a school box. The circles look perfect, Breen says; nipples aren't. Each has its own particular character, like an individual fingernail or the pattern of veins in a hand.

A single mastectomy usually means matching the patient's other nipple. A double mastectomy and reconstruction gives patients a new option for nipples: picking their own. They might want them larger, smaller, pinker, browner, just as they might want breasts bigger or smaller or rounder. "They have almost total control," Rosen says. "It becomes a question of how they want to look."

Mix and match

The tattoo inks in this office come from the Spaulding Color Corp. of Voorheesville, N.Y., a supplier to tattoo artists nationwide. In mixing, Rosen starts with a base color, such as Salmon 8026, and adds a skin tone, such as light brown #1. He knows that the color will lighten about 25 percent, so mixing can be tricky. "It's a little of this and a little of that, like a cocktail," Rosen says.

Using a set of seven electrically driven needles, within a single shaft resembling a pen, and picking a needle size and speed to match the size of the area, Breen inserts the ink under the first layer of skin at 150 pulsations per second. The sound mimics an electric shaver's.

For Breen, a big cosmetic challenge is the areola, the dark, roughly circular area around the outcrop, that includes little bumps called "Montgomery's tubercles." With the needles, she stipples them in. Most clients, she says, walk out in less than an hour. She instructs them on after-care: Bacitracin for a couple of days, keep the gauze in place, pat dry, stay out of the sun, don't pick off the extra skin. About six weeks later, they shed the last layer of dead skin and, with it, the last physical (and, they hope, emotional) residue of cancer and recovery.

"I've never had anyone say they were disappointed," Breen says. "It makes me feel so good about myself to be able to do that for somebody."

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