

We can grow older with grace and genuine wellbeing

By Ruth Ostrow

CONTROVERSY has erupted over my recent story on the International Conference on Healthy Ageing and Longevity, being held in Brisbane in March. Certain practitioners got upset because I praised the "healthy-ageing" movement as opposed to the "anti-ageing" movement.

The anti-ageing movement is rampant across the Western world. Anti-ageing – as defined by the healthy-ageing movement – advocates that we do whatever we can to stop the ageing process.

Proponents profess that we should look forever young. On this premise they sell trillions of dollars worth of products and services into the market including face and beauty creams, plastic surgery, products such as Botox – one of nature's most toxic and potent poisons which paralyses facial muscles in a bid to stop the wrinkles that come from normal expressions – plus myriad others.

As Naomi Wolf wrote extensively in her book *The Beauty Myth*, media, advertisers, music clip creators, Hollywood, all collude to create an ideal of beauty which is then foisted on the public. And with most advertising models we see nowadays digitally altered, air-brushed and even lengthened in order to sell product, the average woman becomes susceptible to continual subliminal harassment – the implication being that unless she looks perfect, never wrinkles nor has normal pockets of fatty cells (needed to store certain hormones) then she is for the reject pile.

My own daughter, only 10, is already suffering body-image problems, and she's a normal size – her peers are potential candidates for eating disorders. At the other end are anti-ageing products, services, and drugs, pushed by endless propaganda, and not just targeting women. Men who are competent, mature lovers are belittled into buying products that keep them forever hard, forever potent, forever 18 with lush heads of hair.

It seems no product is too extreme, no behaviour too out-there for those determined not to age. As a recent cover story in *Who* magazine testifies, anti-ageing products have become so rampant in America they are ruining Hollywood.

Actors are expressionless and are having so much surgery they can no longer be cast in age-appropriate roles. They don't look like mothers and fathers, yet cannot replace younger stars like Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt.

"On one hit American TV show, the stars are so over-Botoxed they have it on the craft services table. It's an epidemic," the magazine quotes a casting director.

A cosmetics doctor who wrote to me in defence of Botox told me it blocks nerve impulses that trigger "hyperactive muscle contractions" – I think he means smiling and frowning. In a subsequent letter he justified his work on the basis that: "Whilst some might find beauty in a wilted flower, many more find greater beauty in a flower at the height of its bloom. I help people maintain their bloom for as long as they can."

This is the sort of merciless rhetoric that women have to face every day that causes them to feel vulnerable, ashamed of the natural processes, and primed to alter their bodies.

Meanwhile the healthy-ageing movement, to which I adhere and volunteer my time, hails older women in their full ripeness, helps men find natural answers to their diminishing libido and women their changing beauty – blending profound Buddhist teachings of self-acceptance with natural healing systems which promote longevity, energy and total wellbeing.

It's a collection of leading scientists, doctors, and health professionals from around the world who are tired of the grip the anti-ageing and beauty industries have on the minds and souls of us all. Whilst not vilifying anti-ageing, we believe anti-ageing products and procedures should be used sparingly and not become tools for denial, self-hatred, misery and obsession. Such negative emotions deplete the immune system.

We lament that young girls who should be glowing with pride at their lovely, rounded shapes are humiliated by unrealistic images. We believe older women should be proud they have stretch-marks having given birth and breast-fed children, rather than conditioned to feel unattractive.

And where is reality in all the manipulation anyway? In the recent international pantomime who got the prince? Who said being beautiful guarantees happiness? In this society there's little understanding of the deeper positive effects that acceptance, spirituality, meditation and self-awareness have on the immune system and on general health. The human smile (oops, hyperactive muscle contractions) is said to trigger the body to release powerful antioxidants and relaxants, which is why it's promoted in ancient eastern systems like chi gung, taoism and yoga.

A recent article in Time magazine talked about the chemistry of happiness. It is now scientifically proven that the natural chemicals and euphorics that come from joy, a sense of meaning, sex and love, keep us juicy, our skin elastic, our organs and bodily systems flushed, our hormones in balance – as always understood in the East.

Whilst we all understand that cosmetics professionals are just meeting a growing demand, the time has come to challenge the propaganda – and subsequent unhappiness – fuelling that demand, so we can grow older with grace and genuine health.

What do you think? Share your views on this controversial topic.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 19 FEB 2005