

The bald and the beautiful

By Ruth Ostrow

Ruth Ostrow waxes lyrical on women's obsession with removing hair, everywhere.

Some things you do for love, some for hate, and if you're a writer there are things you do for a good story. Which is how I find myself lying, without knickers, on a bed in a beauty salon, waiting with no small degree of alarm for a Brazilian wax.

"Do you want a landing strip?" asks the therapist. She is experienced, mature - the sort of woman you would trust with your most precious possession. "What's that?" I manage to get out.

"It's a small strip of hair down the centre that acts as a sort of, well, um, pointer," she says, almost blushing.

After years of writing about sex, I know men need all the help they can get navigating the treacherous and mysterious terrain of the female body. And so, with teeth clenched, I go through what is probably the most painful thing I have experienced since natural childbirth. I only wish there had been an epidural and pethidine mask handy.

Why do we do it? Every week, millions of women - even women who opt for caesarean births - go in for "the pull". Using various means of depilation, including waxing, plucking and laser treatment, they target eyebrows, underarms, legs and areas more subterranean. In Sydney, a friend is in a Brazilian club; instead of Tupperware parties they get together for coffee, cake and "ouch!".

As you read this there are women all over the world having strips of hair painfully ripped out. In Britain, women spend around \$700 million a year on hair removal. In Australia last year, women spent \$40 million on razors and \$30 million on depilatory products such as waxes and creams. This does not even include the millions spent in beauty rooms using therapists to do the job, or on laser and electrolysis treatments.

Hair Removal and the Construction of Gender, a thesis by Merran Toerien, conducted while at the University of York (which includes some Australian research), concludes that more than 90 per cent of study participants reported having removed hair from their underarms and legs, and more than 80 per cent from their pubic area and eyebrows. Most participants recalled first removing their hair at around puberty.

As London's The Observer Magazine reported recently, 35 years after the publication of the revolutionary book *The Female Eunuch*, in which Germaine Greer bemoans the fact women suppress all signs of their libido, we seem to have lost the battle to be natural. Female role models such as Julia Roberts are vilified by other women for waving a fulsome armpit at fans, and Drew Barrymore was recently lambasted - and sniggered at by female gossip columnists - for revealing body hair at New York's Fashion Week. Despite years of feminist lobbying, the message is clear: "It's off or you're out."

Don't underestimate how painful it is - and not just to the hip pocket. The issue might not be such a sensitive one for fawn-like blondes with thin hair who

probably don't need to wax anyway, but for us darker women with our thick wiry hair, or older women whose hair is now coarser, "My God ... Oh my God!"

The red welts that rise up all over the pubis, the eyebrows, the nipples, the upper lip, the toes and the armpits are testimony to the agony.

In a bid to understand why women do it, I survey friends, including two beauty therapists. My empirical research nets the following explanation: about 25 per cent do it to please themselves. They genuinely love the feel of naked flesh. One girlfriend says it feels "sexy" and "turns her on". Another says it looks cleaner and is more hygienic: "I think hair looks gross hanging out of bathers and I don't like smell under my arms." About 25 per cent don't care either way but are following fashion, peer pressure or conditioning.

A male friend who has been living in France for many years says there was a time when European women favoured underarm hair, but the influx of celebrity advertising from the US has made it popular to pull. "Smooth as silk" is being subliminally inflicted on the psyche.

The other 50 per cent of women I talk to are - as one would expect - influenced by the desires of their men. But what of these desires? Jo Anne Baker, a Sydney-based sex therapist and author of *Sex Tips: Advice from Women Sex Experts Around the World* (Allen & Unwin), says: "Personally, I think it's unfortunate that many men equate beauty with what a girl of 14 looks like rather than the true beauty of a ripe woman who has natural body hair. Healthy female hormones lead to hair growth, which is raw, earthy and sexy. It's a shame that our society indulges men their emotional immaturity."

But the news is not all bad for hirsute women. There are actually clubs and internet sites that eroticise female body hair. Meanwhile, the poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote in his love poem, *Portrait of a Girl*: "She is profoundly worried that ... she is too hairy. The lucky American girls are not hairy ... I wish I could show her what such hair and haunches do for one like me."

My French friend speculates that the dislike of hair on women is an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, and that female body hair is repressed because of its sexual overtones (being seen as "wild" and "dirty"). Indeed, Merran Toerien's thesis confirms that in non-Western and European countries (for example, Spain, Germany and France) "anecdotally the norm for hair removal is reputedly less strong". This could be due to more liberal attitudes to the human body and natural bodily functions.

But we shouldn't ignore the fact that it's not just a female trend to remove excess hair. In the gay world, men with hairy backs are called bears. There are bear lovers and bear haters. Beauty therapists are kept busy waxing backs and groins. And metrosexuals are mad at it, too. A male friend told me his latest girlfriend insisted he wax his back. He reports: "It was the closest I've ever come to hell on Earth."

But even before the metrosexual phenomenon, men were obsessed with removing and grooming facial hair. And last year worldwide, both sexes spent more than \$5 billion on razor blades, reports Gillette. Writers, thinkers and philosophers have speculated on why we remove body hair. Some say it is to do with our need to be superior to the apes and closer to a God-like image - ethereal and smooth.

As a naturalist, I disagree. I see God in what is earthy and true. But I admit I do have one weakness: while I would never have another Brazilian - after the welts went down the pleasure certainly wasn't worth the pain - I don't like hairy legs on dark-haired women and have consequently endured that particular depilation horror since I was a teenager.

As for men, I quite like the idea of a beastly alpha male sweeping me off my feet and into the trees. However, if my partner had a hair hanging out of his ear or nose, I would grab the tweezers without thinking twice.

But that's what most separates we humans from the gorillas - our endless capacity for contradiction.

Ruth Ostrow's column resumes next week.

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