



*"While self-acceptance may ultimately be one of the greatest beauty tips, coming to terms with a sudden facial disfigurement is a journey that is different for everyone."*

# SYMMETRY

By **BLANCHE WILKIE**

## TRY

*of hope*

Imagine waking up on the day before giving birth to your first child and finding that half your face can't move. With your body and mind wired for one of the most significant transitions a woman can make, suddenly an overwhelming sense of anxiety sets in.

The words "Bells Palsy" and what that means tumble from the doctor's mouth in the Emergency section of the hospital but it's all a surreal blur.

You give birth the next day, and can't smile in the photos as you clutch your newborn to your chest.

Emotional numbness preludes postnatal depression – your half-frozen face a mirror of a part of your heart that feels trapped beyond your control.

Like every new mother you greet relatives and friends, stare at your baby for hours, feed, change nappies, bathe, wrap, hold, and adjust to your new life as your body recovers from the birth.

Battling broken sleep takes on a whole new dimension, however, as you can't close your eye.

At this time of heightened vulnerability and expectant joy, a physical facial deformity is the last thing you need to be confronted with.

As former model, make-up artist and beauty therapist, Penny Hornsby, says: "I had prepared myself to lose my body, but not my face."

"At that time, I couldn't close my eye. When it first happened, I couldn't eat, drink or talk. People would phone me and thought I was drunk as I slurred my words.

Penny had a new 'look' in mind for how she would present as a new mum, and had even bought make-up in anticipation. "This was not the look I had in mind," she says.

"I didn't sleep; I had to tape my eye shut and lubricate it every day so I wouldn't get a retinal ulcer (with the associated possibility of losing my vision). I was also allergic to the tape which meant I broke out in a rash and welts on my skin."

"The impact of this on my role as a mother meant it took me a long time to bond with my son."



Penny before treatment by Dr George Marcells

Penny after treatment by Dr George Marcells



Penny after treatment by Dr George Marcells

*"The difference, even after my first treatment with Botox, was incredible. I've been going back for treatments every three months ever since," Penny states.*



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At first Penny was told that the paralysis was temporary and she was likely to return to normal within two weeks. However, instead of getting better, it got worse.

"I was put on a course of steroids. I've since learned about a crucial treatment that can make a difference if it's administered in the first 24 hours, but this wasn't on offer in New Zealand where I was based. After six months, I saw a neurologist and he said, "Get used to it as there is nothing that can be done."

"I was devastated and came very close to the point of no return; I didn't do it because of my son. I realised I had to get some help and do something.

"Then I became angry. I decided I wasn't going to take the advice lying down and got on the internet. I found a paper written by physiotherapist Sue Coulson about facial exercises that can be done to re-train muscles, and flew to Australia to meet her the following week.

Sue was wonderful, and also said, "you've got to see Dr George Marcells."

Dr Marcells is a facial plastic surgeon and ear, nose and throat surgeon based in Sydney. He is also an experienced cosmetic injector and trains other doctors in advanced techniques. Together with facial nerve disorder specialist and ENT surgeon, Dr Glen Croxon and physiotherapist Sue Coulson, Dr Marcells provides a team for the assessment and ongoing treatment of patients with these disorders. Dr Marcells devotes regular clinic days for treating people with Bell's palsy.

Dr Marcells explains: "Typical things that cause palsy are viral nerve injuries, brain tumours, strokes, and head injuries. The majority of patients have an initial period of paralysis where their whole side of the face droops and the eye can't close. Most return to normal but many don't."

Bell's palsy is a paralysis or weakness of the muscles on one side of the face. The cause is unknown, although infection or autoimmune responses are suspected. The majority of people with Bell's palsy, around 90 per cent, will recover completely with time.

Problems sufferers experience that Dr Marcells can help address include:

- Pain and tightness in areas of the face, the neck and around the eye
- Marked asymmetry - at rest and with facial animation
- Decreased function of facial movements

"People can feel very self-conscious about the asymmetry and this can affect their confidence socially – especially when they smile or talk.

"Surgery, such as brow lifts and face lifts, can help and Botox has a great role to play", says Dr Marcells.

"We inject Botox into muscles that have become tight – muscles around the eye and other facial areas such as the chin and neck. This relaxes the muscles and eases the pain and pressure so it feels better for the patient. We can also inject Botox into parts of the face to improve symmetry."

Another problem often experienced by people with facial palsy is known as 'synkinesis', where the movement of one part of the face automatically creates movement in another part of the face - for example, when someone smiles and their eyes close simultaneously. With an advanced understanding of facial muscle anatomy, Dr Marcells injects Botox to relax unwanted movements (such as eye closures) Patients can then perform exercises recommended by Sue Coulson to re-train the neurological pathways and help them recover.

When Penny first saw Dr Marcells in 2006, he offered her hope.

"Yes, there are things we can do", he said.

"The difference, even after my first treatment with Botox, was incredible. I've been going back for treatments every three months ever since," Penny states.

"Initially the treatments addressed the lift in my eye. Because some muscles wanted to work overtime and some were slack, correct injection technique enabled the right muscles to have more function when the over-compensating muscles are relaxed.

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Each time I return, the treatment and area being injected is subtly different and over time it has allowed more symmetry and function in some of the muscles that hadn't worked for a while. Dr Marcells also did some injecting on my "good side" (the side of my face that wasn't paralysed) to improve symmetry. He is like an artist with a needle; if anyone can turn a Picasso into a Da Vinci, it's Dr Marcells.

My mouth was really down but the work he has done has helped strengthen the correct muscles so now it looks more balanced.

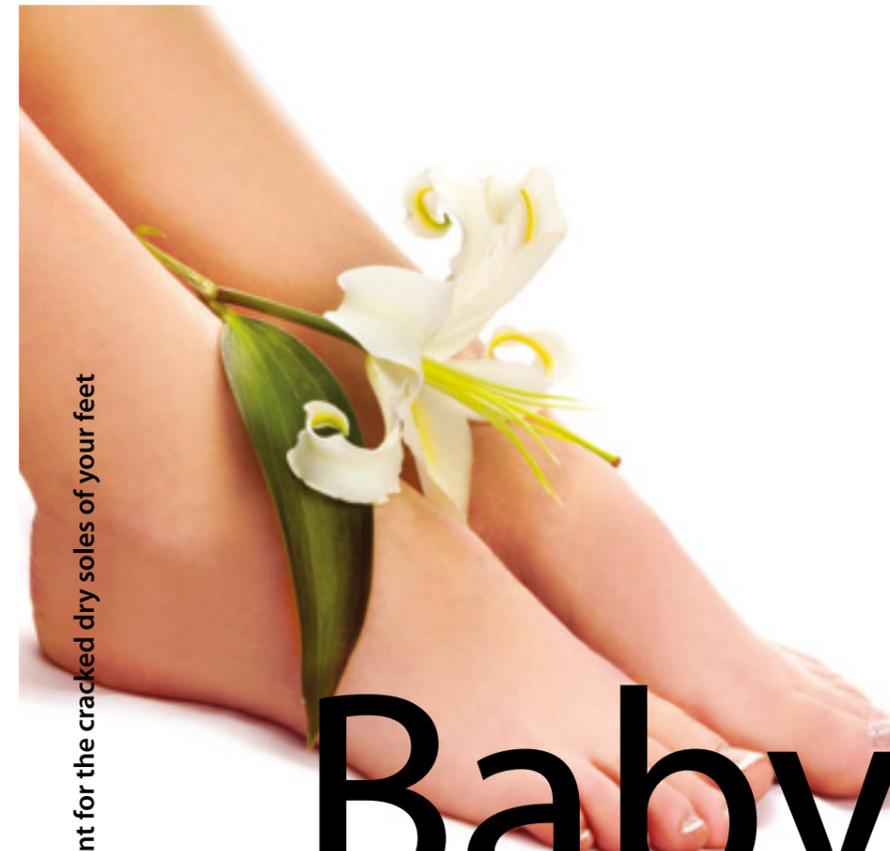
I also underwent two surgical procedures with Dr Marcells – a brow lift and an eyelid procedure. I can close my eye now where I couldn't before.

"My face will never look exactly the same but it's getting to the point where people don't notice anything and the quirks of my face are now a part of me."

While self-acceptance may ultimately be one of the greatest beauty tips, coming to terms with a sudden facial disfigurement is a journey that is different for everyone. Tips from Penny to help restore appearance confidence along the way include:

- See Sue Coulson and Dr George Marcells
- Wearing caps can help
- Sunglasses are vital – especially as your eyes are more sensitive
- Hair – a fringe can help cover the affected side
- Make-up – wear natural make-up; don't use lip liner and avoid applying strong colours
- In photos, show your 'good side'
- A professional eyebrow shaper can help slightly lift the appearance of the affected side with a good shape
- Sleep – everything gets worse without it – so try and ensure you get a healthy amount
- Massage – your face carries a lot of stress and tension so self-massage or better still, regular massage from a qualified practitioner makes a big difference in easing pain or atrophy.
- Talk to someone – either a professional and/or someone who has experienced similar issues. Sharing your experiences and hearing and learning from others can help you realise you are not alone.
- Be kind to yourself. **PB**

For more information contact Dr George Marcells, FRACS, [www.drmarcells.com.au](http://www.drmarcells.com.au), tel: 1300 555 095, email: [jacqueline@af.com.au](mailto:jacqueline@af.com.au) About Face, 21 Spring Street, Bondi Junction, NSW 2022



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