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From The Times

February 05, 2007

How I got rid of my 'moobs'

Last year, 4,000 men had their 'man-boobs' removed Steve Beale, who had the op in 2003, tells his story

A record 4,000 blokes in the UK had their man-breasts, or "moobs", removed by cosmetic surgery last year. According to the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, that's almost double the number for 2005, when 2,100 went under the knife for the same reason.

I had the operation – known as gynaoplasty, the moob condition itself being more sensibly known as gynaecomastia — back in 2003, making me something of a pioneer. Since then gynaoplasty has gone up from eighth to third place in the top ten cosmetic procedures undergone by men.

Moobs are certainly the *defect du jour*. Venerable famous females avoid the worst excesses of the celebrity press – Angelina Jolie's scrawny hands might make *Heat*'s "circle of shame" while Judy Dench's varicose veins are spared – but any chap is fair game.

Newspapers have taken to printing shots of noted moobies, such as Simon Cowell, Tony Blair, Robbie Williams and Chris Moyles, going topless on holiday.

BACKGROUND

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Men with 'moobs' swell queues for breast surgery
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Farcical, saucy, and somewhat tragic, man-breasts make ideal fodder for the British tabloid media.

And as someone who sported a spectacular pair for most of his life, I can confirm that people do find them vividly intriguing. During my ample-chested days I lost count of the (unwanted) pleas of others, both male and female, to give them an exploratory mash.

So it's unsurprising that thousands of men with unwanted tits are having them taken off. I had one of the first "day case" operations, where you're in and out in a couple of hours. The anaesthetist put me under, the surgeon made crescent-shaped cuts around the lower half of each nipple and the offending flesh burst out like roots from a germinating bulb.

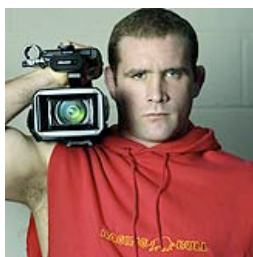
Two keyhole incisions were made on either side of my chest and liposuction employed to suck out the fat that had built up around the moobs themselves. When I came round afterwards, the theatre nurses triumphantly presented my vanquished breast flesh on a silver surgical tray. Humble in defeat, the two little piles of orangey-pink offcuts resembled Nigella Lawson's mango

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salsa. I felt a very masculine rush of man's mastery over nature. Then the nurses tipped my man breasts into the bin, which dashed any hopes of having them preserved in formaldehyde.

I'm dwelling on the gory detail of the breast flesh itself because the most common misconception of man-boobs is that they're purely a result of obesity (recent thinking plumbs more for a genetic inclination, and they certainly run in my family, or the more way-out theory that there's too many female hormones in the water system due to the contraceptive pill).

My man-boobs appeared postadolescence, at around the time I was expecting mutant super-powers instead. They were so unattractive that at 16 my mum pulled me along to the local health centre to see if anything could be done. The family GP's advice was simply to go on a diet. I got down to ten and a half stone (67kg), which is pretty slim for a 5ft 10in (1.78m) guy with a pocket battleship frame.

Unfortunately the doctor was proved wrong — my moobs didn't recede at all and became even more apparent on top of a svelte(r) torso. In the rugby team changing rooms at my West Country all-boys' grammar school, I was second in fascination only to the unassuming guy with a willy down to his knees. Like many blokes with an "unfortunate characteristic", as much as I could have done without the gibes, I can't say that I descended into de- spair and self-hatred when I got teased about my man-breasts.

Man-breasts.co.uk says it's "the site that says it's fat and it's proud — then quickly puts its shirt back on" and I employed a similar combination of humour and bravado. My party piece was sucking my own nipples — and that was usually the last word on the subject. Once I entered the more diplomatic world of London media people stopped mentioning my man-breasts. There were isolated incidents — the Brazilian transsexual who gave them an uninvited grope and casually inquired "hor-mona?"; the Northern lap-dancer at whom I'd been throwing money all night who joyously reminded my fellow stags "He's got tits!"; and the caring female colleague who asked in all seriousness if I had ever worn a bra (er, no).

But despite the comparative lack of interest I did indeed still have those tits that maybe justified said bra. I could accept them as part of me, but it was still pretty unpleasant to cast my gaze down, during sex for instance, and see two white chocolate walnut whips dripping down from my chest.

In my late twenties, plastic surgery kept coming up as a solution. My moobs hadn't come between myself and romance, and I was seeing a girl whose mum worked in cosmetic surgery and reported that gynaeplasty was very common. My own mother passed on news of a fireman who'd got his done on the NHS, citing "pressures within a masculine professional environment". Then a close friend underwent the op himself. He was evangelical about the results, which did look perfect. "Am just enjoying my first man-breast-free summer, lying on beach with T-shirt well and truly OFF," he texted me. Worries about cost and danger assuaged, I resolved to rid myself of my man-breasts through medical science.

Which takes us back to the recovery room. Afterwards I had to wear sutures for two weeks — this was during the sweltering summer of 2003, and I chucked back far more painkillers to take my mind off the itchy dressings than for the very temporary pain of invasive surgery. Then they were gone — almost. Admiring myself in the mirror, I was suspicious that one half of my new flatter chest was slightly bigger than the other. I put off reporting this back to my surgeon as I was plagued by worries that I had now entered a new strata of physical obsession, and was perhaps "addicted to plastic surgery".

"Everyone has one boob bigger than the other" said my girlfriend of the time. "Not men," was my earnest response. When I did summon up the courage to reapproach the good Dr Malik I was extremely relieved that he confirmed my doubts. He said he

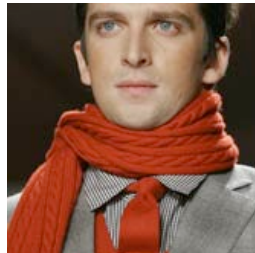
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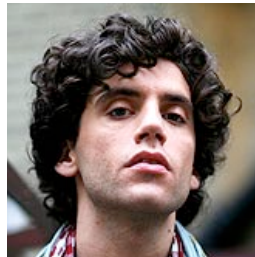
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could have another go at it “under local” but a bit of working out would suffice instead. I took up Thai boxing and thanks as much to that I now have the figure of a Victorian strongman.

And it's great. Not only do I no longer have the “unattractive protuberances” themselves but the effect on my overall silhouette has been just as dramatic. I've a V-shaped torso rather than being noticeably top-heavy. I was very quick to bring up these changes in conversation — “men tend to keep their decision to have an operation very secretive, they don't want anyone to put them off, but afterwards they tend to be very open

about it,” says Bernice Berry, spokesperson for the cosmetic surgery chain Harley Medical. I'd also had my teeth whitened at around the same time. “What do you think?” I'd ask in the pub, rising to my feet in self-presentation. “We didn't even know you had man breasts,” was the most common response. “But your teeth,” which I was a lot less conscious of, “look amazing.” I got a handle on the widely disputed comment girls make when they say they're “wearing this miniskirt for me”. My own perception of my body was ultimately more important than others'.

I wasn't guilty about changing myself — I was glad the damn things were gone. I've taken part in several TV mini-debates on the subject and on the majority of occasions the person on the other side of the argument is a slim blonde who disingenuously tells me that “beauty is on the inside”. I'm not sure if no longer possessing moobs has had a huge impact on my love life, bar my own image of myself naked, which is obviously much improved. But what I am convinced of is that it's made me a more presentable and confident professional.

“In an information and ideas-based economy where so many of us have similar skills, what differentiates people is their appearance and how vibrant they are,” says Sean Pillot de Chenecy of Captain Crikey trend consultants, whose clients include that staple of male bathrooms, Lynx deodorant. “So appearance and ‘aura’ have become very important for younger men wanting to get on. It's not a silly fad, it's a multimillion-pound industry based around men looking fitter, younger and more alert.”

I do feel terribly sorry for fellow moob sufferers who can't afford the operation, which costs about £4,000. Yet cosmetic surgery is beginning to be seen as a far better way to spend your cash than on this year's TV or yet another disappointing beach holiday. Having grown up part of the sci-fi generation I'm quite comfortable with having undergone a procedure considered extreme. While I do profess awe — and a little scepticism — for those who say they're happy with themselves and would never “fiddle with their bodies”, I have no regrets whatsoever. I very much doubt any other bloke who had moobs, and now doesn't, would disagree.

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