Hair loss websites and research: a hard sell masquerading as support?

In a world where the media disproportionately features men with a full head of hair, the male population is made to feel that hair loss is an isolating ‘illness’ that needs to be cured. In this article, Glen Jankowski highlights the influence of pharmaceutical companies on these issues and draws aesthetic practitioners’ attention to the overuse of the word ‘proven’

By the age of 30 years it’s a third of men, by the age of 50 years it’s half, and by 70 years most men will experience it (Knott, 2013; NHS Choices, 2013). Have you guessed it yet? It’s hair loss. But going by the UK’s media, you wouldn’t know it. The majority of men featured in the UK’s men’s magazines, dating forums and porn websites don’t just have muscles and a seriously low level of body fat — they are likely to have symmetrical faces, minimal body hair, and most crucially of all a full head of hair. In fact, of the 4934 images of men the author coded in recent issues of Men’s Health, FHM, Attitude and Gay Times, only 7% showed any sign of hair loss (Jankowski et al, 2014).

So if hair loss affects many men, why is it so rarely represented? And why on the rare occasions when hair loss is represented is it depicted as an isolating illness that requires treatment? The answer is hair loss pharmaceutical companies. These companies not only set up hair loss websites that pretend to support men (yet actually just serve as disguised adverts), but also commission and fund ‘neutral’ hair loss research. Consequently, men who have hair loss see it as an isolating illness that requires specific ‘treatments’. These ‘treatments’ are only available from these pharmaceutical companies.

To move past the medicalisation of hair loss and allow men to accept it without buying into expensive, risky or time-consuming ‘treatments’, it is essential to have transparency in research, resist pharmaceutical influence and celebrate the diversity of appearance in the media.

Being culturally attractive

In the author’s experience, when men are asked what society believes the perfect man looks like, after saying ‘muscular’, ‘tall’ and ‘lean’, they will eventually talk about head hair and say ‘oh and of course he’s not bald’. This isn’t because head hair amount is unimportant, but because it’s considered so indisputably important. Unless men are fully shaved and compensate this with the muscularity and machismo of Vin Diesel and Bruce Willis, hair loss is not considered culturally attractive.

Pop psychology will tell us that this perception of hair loss is all to do with survival of the fittest, stating that men with hair loss just aren’t that biogenetically fit. This approach to psychology will also support the idea that men with full heads of hair have better genes and women select them because they want the best for their offspring. This kind of evolutionary psychology is often just used to legitimise the status quo and is highly convenient storytelling to justify restrictive gender roles. After all, most people choose partners for more than their genes, and being bald doesn’t make you unattractive.

However, there is a more obvious reason why hair loss is seen by many as unattractive and a problem. Last year, fantastic research by Kevin Harvey looked at how hair loss was portrayed across eight popular hair loss websites (Harvey, 2013). He found that, through images and text that were used, hair loss was generally depicted as a lonely illness that made men unloved. Furthermore, hair loss only requires ‘treatment’ for balding loners to be transformed into follicularly-abundant men who are happy, successful and surrounded by loved ones. And where could one get this ‘treatment’? Pharmaceutical companies, of course — the very ones that set up and own the websites used by many men.

Profit is king

One of the clear reasons why hair loss is considered unattractive is because pharmaceutical companies make money when men buy their expensive and lifelong ‘treatments’. As Susie Orbach (2014) rightly pointed out: ‘Companies are mining our bodies for profit.’

But sadly this isn’t the only place pharmaceutical companies are influential. Our understandings of ‘treatments’ are also dictated by the companies too. When the author did a basic literature review of studies on the psychosocial impact of hair loss, he noticed a strange thing. Studies by different authors, published in different journals and on different dates kept using the same poorly-constructed question in their surveys. This was because the same marketing company had been employed by pharmaceutical companies to ‘assess’ the impact of hair loss and pass it off as a study in a research journal. Other studies (so far there are at least nine of them) are either funded by a pharmaceutical company or have been authored by one of the company’s employees (Jankowski, 2014).

These studies were published in scientific journals that appear to be independently exploring the impact of hair loss on men’s wellbeing. Therefore, when readers pick up the article, they will likely expect it to explore how other men deal with hair loss, when instead the content being read is a...
Hair loss is significantly disguised advert or advertorial for a pharmaceutical ‘treatment’.

The power of ‘proven’
Officially, finasteride and minoxidil are the only two hallowed ‘treatments’ proven to be effective in preventing certain kinds of hair loss among some men. However, it is important for health professionals and patients to remain sceptical when it comes to the word ‘proven’. As Goldacre (2012) brilliantly highlighted, pharmaceutical companies’ influence goes much further than by just funding research. Often when the research is funded, the researcher will be made to sign a gagging clause so that if the company isn’t happy with a finding the study won’t be published, and nobody will know about it. This publication bias, where only findings showing effectiveness are published, skews the evidence and leads aesthetic practitioners and the public to think certain treatments are useful when they may not be.

Although there are published randomised controlled trials (RCTs) attesting to the effectiveness of finasteride and minoxidil, nobody knows whether other RCTs were conducted nor whether these RCTs also found the treatments to be effective. And because it’s not just people’s bank balances that these treatments are damaging, but also potentially their physical health as well (e.g. finasteride can cause an increased risk of prostate cancer, headaches, libido diminishment, and depression), this missing data is a serious problem.

In 2013, Kevin Harvey found that hair loss was generally depicted online as a lonely illness that made men unloved. Men with hair loss are often forced to feel isolated by others. When hair loss is depicted as a problem, so that more men cover their hair loss by using wigs, seeking hair loss transplants or by staying indoors, we start to forget the alternative (Wiseman, 2014). It is possible and indeed cheaper, healthier and infinitely easier to help men to accept their hair loss. In fact, in one study that wasn’t influenced by a hair loss pharmaceutical company, researchers found that men who accepted their hair loss and let it show coped better than men who were trying to hide it (Kranz, 2011).

Conclusion
When hair loss is depicted as a problem, so that more men cover their hair loss by using wigs, seeking hair loss transplants or by staying indoors, we start to forget the alternative (Wiseman, 2014). It is possible to not only to look ‘good’, but also to be happy, successful and loved without conforming to corporate-dictated appearance ideals.

References

Acceptance as an alternative
The alternative to these ‘treatments’ to hair loss is sadly the one least heard of: acceptance. Baldness is not an illness and doesn’t have to be socially isolating nor devastating. It is possible and indeed cheaper, healthier and infinitely easier to help men to accept their hair loss. In fact, in one study that wasn’t influenced by a hair loss pharmaceutical company, researchers found that men who accepted their hair loss and let it show coped better than men who were trying to hide it (Kranz, 2011).

Key points
► Hair loss is significantly underrepresented in the media
► Treatments for hair loss are heavily promoted despite hair loss being a benign condition
► Pharmaceutical companies have great influence on hair loss research and hair loss websites
► It is important to resist medicalisation and for appearance diversity to be celebrated in the media

We must be sceptical when it comes to the word 'proven'. Publication bias skews the evidence and leads health professionals and the public to think treatments are useful when they may not be.