The Cheek of Them!

Will subsidized Sculptra be accessible to HIVers?

February 1, 2005 By Tim Murphy

Hollow-cheeked HIVers rejoiced last August when the FDA approved Sculptra (formerly New-Fill) to correct HIV-related facial lipoatrophy (fat loss)—the first drug approved expressly to correct HIV lipodystrophy. But they were soon howling when French drugmaker Aventis priced the product at $960 for a two-vial kit—high enough for it to earn big bucks on the lucrative, non-HIV cosmetic-surgery market, but four times the price a U.S. buyer's club once charged HIVers. Fixing your face with Sculptra takes two to three vials per session—and four to six sessions, each at an average doc's fee of $400. That brings the new tab to roughly $7,000 to $9,000—not counting later touch-ups (Sculptra isn't permanent). And the FDA OK is no guarantee that health plans will pay.

Activists demanded that Aventis help offset the cost to HIVers—after all, the company had used the HIV angle as a fast track to the FDA nod, which made Sculptra legal in the U.S. for any use. In early December, after months of delays, Aventis came through, announcing that HIVers making $40,000 or less were eligible for free Sculptra (the doc's fee is a different story) while those making $40,000 to $80,000 would pay on a sliding scale up to the regular price. (Call 888.SCULPTRA for details.) "I'm pretty satisfied" with the offer, says HIVer Nelson Vergel, who helped negotiate it.

Meanwhile, HIVers continue to probe other face-fixing options, like silicone droplets and the FDA-unapproved (but popular in Tijuana) Bio-Alcamid. There's even talk of an upcoming HIVer pilgrimage to Rio de Janeiro to get a filler called PMMA for $500 per face. Want all the dish? E-mail Vergel at *PowerTx@aol.com* to join his insidetrack Yahoo! group.

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