

A DOCTOR'S GUIDE TO



• GROWING A •

MEDICAL BEARD

REASON FOR STUDY

A difficult question was being repeated at work a few months ago. I had anticipated and prepared for it, but my rehearsed answer always came out garbled. I face the same problem whenever people ask me why I became a doctor. While I have given many altruistic reasons, I think I sounded cliché most of the times. The straight truth is it's cool to be a doctor. There was no real reason as to why I wanted to keep a beard. I just thought it was cool to have one. Even Hippocrates had one!

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN

Retrospectively, it had been a great social experiment on human behaviour. I learnt that change in any form is hard to accept, and all I had done was altered the way I looked. A further observation was that one man's meat is truly another man's poison. People had commented how incredibly militant it was, but on the flipside, an equal number

had marvelled at how *GQ Magazine* cover-worthy it looked. And yes, we all suffer from selective hearing. That's why it had remained on my face for six interesting months. Or rather, my face was under it.

METHODOLOGY

It's no surprise that one of the preliminary requirements is that of having the potential for enough hair. A good status gauge is what happens after a night call. If there is stubble from the maxilla down, you are probably the gifted one. On the contrary, if there is some just on the tip of your chin, I suggest you bow out gracefully and respect the magnitude of a full-grown beard. The teenage days are long over.

The first four to six weeks of growing out the beard is the most challenging. In its infancy, the beard looks utterly messy. The growth sprouts in all angles and perimeter lines are not defined. Almost all self-help beard

community websites advocate starting one while you are on a holiday, as most beards are killed early because of negative comments from colleagues. I recall having someone ask me why I had pubic hair growing on my face. I perpetually had flu during those early days. A surgical mask provided a perfect illusion that nothing was happening on the sly. Sometimes, it's just easier to unveil the finished product.

DEFINITION

The next step is to carve out a shape. An exhaustive literature search found, to my dismay, that there was no consensus on the definition of the different types of beard. I got a little lost without official guidelines and statements from governing bodies. The simplistic way to characterise one is based on famous people who have sported them (and it comes together with their associations). For example, there is The Lincoln (patriotism), The Wolverine (aggression), The Bin Laden (negativity), etc.

Intriguingly, Mr Narendra Modi, a fellow Gujarati, was elected Prime Minister of India during my journey with the beard. The world was fixated on his talent. He had something more to offer. The Modi would be the ideal medical beard. It was well-kempt and nonintrusive, and had already proven its efficacy in office.



Making sure that the left and right halves were symmetrical was tough. An uneven beard is extremely annoying. That's when good social support is useful. My wife had the glorious task of assessing it every morning, providing input on where to nick in order to balance both sides. She showed another aspect of love: doing the task with conviction, although she hated the beard down to the last strand.

DISCUSSION

Be prepared to look more than your true biological age. I was told that I looked at least ten years older. This was a double-edged sword. Patients followed my advice more readily in the clinics. I could appease angry relatives in a shorter time. Juniors thought twice before calling me. The problem was when patients equated the beard with seniority during morning ward rounds and almost all my consultants were beardless.

Keep the length in check regularly. A long, grisly beard gives an impression that they are overworking you. Residency is a busy period and the last thing on my mind after a long day was to drop by Little India to get it nicely trimmed. Although a handheld beard trimmer helped mitigate the time issue, my perpetual paranoia was the razor running amok and accidentally shaving a big patch

away! Think all those hirsute men going for electrocardiograms and the aftermath of the nurses' shaving when the leads don't stick.

The beard makes a good prop for "thinking in progress". Difficult questions asked during tutorials are hard to negotiate. Confessing that you don't know exposes your lack of background reading. Looking away at the ceiling or at the floor is rude. But twirling the ends of the moustache or finger-combing the goatee downwards looks like second nature and gives the nonverbal cue that you are a thinker. My beard was my saviour.

However, I need to be honest. While I have talked about the benefits, one cannot negate the side effects. The beard is incredibly itch-inducing. The discomfort is mainly from the ends of the bristles curling inwards and poking the skin. Antihistamines are the houseman's solution. Lasting effects can be seen when effort is taken to soften the hair. Dedicated shops selling moustache wax, beard oil and beard balm offer relief over multiple follow-ups. Unfortunately, these are non-standard items that are available only at a hefty premium.

LIMITATIONS

Apparently, life dictates that all good things must come to an end. After numerous months, the novelty of the new look had ceased. Daily exposure had desensitised everyone. It was no longer a talking point. The black sheen, which had been another source of pride, was taken away from me – without warning one day, a crop of resistant white hair strands had infiltrated an otherwise clean field. I had

been robbed of my youth! My wife showed caregiver fatigue because of my obsession. My daughter developed transient erythema on her face whenever I showered her with goodnight kisses. Finally, I silently succumbed to the stressors and killed the beard.

FUTURE TRIALS

It is speculative to say for now that the beard has been infectious and that more in the medical field are keeping it. The occasional few that I have noticed while changing postings could have been just a random occurrence. As I mentioned earlier, change is always hard to accept. An easy question is being repeated these days: What happened to the medical beard?

I left it at home. ♦

PROFILE



TEXT BY

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Pinakin is a final year cardiology senior resident in Singhealth. He will grow back his medical beard once he clears the exit exams. Till then, he first needs to grow his medical knowledge!

Legend

1. The beard in all its glory!
2. Tools of the trade

