



Bad blood: How vampires entered the realm of cosmetic medicine

BY MIKE STOKES

Clinical researchers investigating the aesthetic properties of Selphyl® – a brand of autologous platelet-rich plasma (PRP) that is processed with a sample of a patient’s own blood and reinjected to promote healing – unwittingly uncovered a recipe for creating a media fixation: Mix one

part plastic surgery with one part PRP, sprinkle in a dash of vampire imagery and whip into a frenzy. Quickly dubbed the “vampire filler” by the press for its off-label use as an injectable, Selphyl became instantly linked to a gothic new trend in cosmetic medicine.

For Sanjay Batra, PhD, who was named president and CEO of Aesthetic Factors LLC, the company that manufactures Selphyl,

shortly after the buzz began, the attention was both unwanted and unwarranted. While the product was FDA approved for use in orthopedic surgery, Batra says that when he joined the company in October 2010, he was underwhelmed by the lack of good clinical data for the use of PRP and platelet-rich fibrin matrix (PRFM). He wanted to conduct more research and was concerned that

Selphyl being tagged as the “vampire filler” would compromise these efforts.

“Someone in the media coined that term, and it became very sticky because of the allure of vampires with the popularity of the *Twilight* books and films and the idea of living forever,” Batra says. “It was highly associated with Selphyl, but we never actively used or endorsed that term. In fact, I find it rather demeaning to the entire set of stakeholders – the physicians and patients – who use platelet-rich plasma.”

Batra says Aesthetic Factors continues to conduct studies to understand the biology of PRP and PRFM in pursuit of an aesthetic indication.

“We are trying to advance the field, and we are working with top plastic surgeons and derms to do this clinical research,” he says. “This is another reason why we find the term ‘vampire’ to undercut the whole field.”

Where Batra saw the vampire connection to PRP as a burden, however, Charles Runels, MD, saw an opportunity. Dr. Runels, an internist and self-described “redneck” from Alabama, quickly trademarked the name “Vampire FaceLift®” as a way to capitalize on the country’s fascination with both

BREAKING NEWS

Recording artist Jewel partners with ASPS for Breast Reconstruction Awareness campaign

Award-winning singer-songwriter Jewel will perform a benefit concert on Oct. 29 during *Plastic Surgery The Meeting* in New Orleans with proceeds donated to The Plastic Surgery Foundation and breast reconstruction organizations. The event is part of a new partnership between Jewel and ASPS, in which the performer will serve as the national spokesperson for the inaugural National Breast Reconstruction Awareness (BRA) Day on Oct. 17. More information on “An Evening With Jewel” during the annual meeting and National BRA Day will be available in the coming weeks on PSNExtra.org, plasticsurgery.org and in the July/August issue of PSN.

IN THIS ISSUE...

Regenerative medicine task force takes shape

ASPS has launched a Regenerative Medicine in Plastic Surgery Task Force to highlight the potential for regenerative medicine therapies to impact the specialty and facilitate the clinical translation of new technologies into plastic surgery practices. Chair Richard D’Amico, MD, says the panel will strive to raise awareness of the regenerative technologies that plastic surgery has helped create. [Page 9](#)

Are mobile apps your ‘silent’ security breach?

The marriage of medicine and mobile communication devices has enhanced treatment and greatly assisted tech-savvy patients and physicians. Some apps, however, may cause these devices to become sources of potentially serious breaches in federal patient privacy protocols, unless they are handled “smartly.” [Page 11](#)

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Vampire

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beauty and vampires – and began franchising the proprietary procedure in 2011 to his fellow physicians, giving him a vested interest in the success of PRP while making him a thorn in the side of one of the top manufacturers of it.

Batra the ‘vampire’ slayer

Dr. Runels began branding the Vampire FaceLift online and aggressively policing the Internet for hours every night for anyone using the term without his permission (and demanding them to either cease and desist or pay a licensing fee). As part of his branding strategy, Dr. Runels says he wanted to create a Vampire FaceLift marketing kit and contacted Aesthetic Factors for help – not realizing that it was the same company that manufactured Selphyl.

“There was a long pause on the other end of the line, and then they said, ‘You can’t do that – you’re associating that with Selphyl,’” Dr. Runels recalls. “I said, ‘Well, I trademarked the name, I thought it up, and that’s a misconception. I own the name – it’s not Selphyl, it’s a procedure that includes Selphyl.’”

“The next week, I got a letter from their attorney saying to quit using that name,” he adds. “I called her up and I said, ‘You know what? I do live down here, and we have dirt roads and all that, but I have a Washington, D.C., trademark attorney and I’m not stupid. If you want to buy this from me, you can, but you’re *not* going to steal it from me.’ Then I just hung up on her. About a month later I got a call from Sanjay Batra.”

“Initially we were going to try to fight it so we could own the term and bury it,” says Batra. “[Dr. Runels] approached us to inquire if we would do a business deal with him that would allow us to license the term ‘vampire.’ We declined. To use that term, you have to pay him money, and we were not interested in going in that direction. He moved on and did a business deal with another PRP company that has licensed the term and uses it as a major component of its marketing.”

“We negotiated about them licensing the name,” agrees Dr. Runels. “But they never did want to pay me what it was worth. [Batra] basically rope-a-doped me by pretending to negotiate with me until finally I had to dump him. He’s a smart guy, and Selphyl is a good product – it’s just overpriced.”

Batra acknowledges that his primary objective in reaching out to Dr. Runels was not really to strike a deal, but rather to drive a wooden stake through the term.

“The difference is that in a rope-a-dope, a fighter like Muhammad Ali would punch back,” Batra says. “I ended up just getting out of the ring. I ended up like Roberto Duran saying ‘No Mas! No Mas!’ It was clear that our interests were not aligned. Dr. Runels was largely interested in promoting himself and the Vampire FaceLift name – a lurid approach that we do not endorse. We are committed to advancing the field of PRP/PRFM with rigorous science and clinical research. Our approach takes time and commitment to the field, to physicians and to patients. He obviously wanted to get paid, so we’re happy to let our competitors pay him.”

“They sure did like it before until we won the rights to the marketing,” says Tom O’Brien, president of Dallas-based Eclipse Aesthetics – a company which not only shares the name of one of the *Twilight* series of vampire movies, but also owns the exclusive marketing rights to the trademarked term “*vampirefacelift.com*.” Eclipse

also distributes another PRP, Switzerland-based Regen. “It’s no knock on Selphyl – they have a good product, but it seems disingenuous that they don’t like the name anymore. They quit liking it, I guess.”

While Aesthetic Factors may not like the term, the company’s catacombs are not entirely free of vampire lore. The description for Selphyl.com on Google reads “The Selphyl System, known also as the Vampire Facelift Technology,” while entering “VampLift.com” into a web browser will take users to the Selphyl homepage.

“Charlie has played both sides against the middle,” says ASPS member William Stagers, MD, Fairhope, Ala., who has known Dr. Runels for 15 years and considers him a friend. “He has worked these companies with the centrifuges for all he could – and they would do the same to him, so I think he’s just giving them a good run for their money.”

“One thing that I will give him is that he’s a very creative entrepreneur,” Dr. Stagers adds. “He took an established procedure with PRP and capitalized on the vampire craze and was successful in trademarking the ‘vampire’ name.”

Origin story

While there’s no disputing that Dr. Runels had the foresight to take ownership of the catchy “vampire facelift” name, its origin remains a source of contention.

“Dr. Runels says he invented the term – he didn’t,” says Batra.

Batra says it was not a stroke of marketing genius but rather a term coined by the press as early as July 14, 2010, when ABC News published a report on report on Selphyl using the “vampire facelift” term. Dr. Runels claims the name was all his idea.

“At the time, the news was calling PRP the ‘vampire filler,’ and Selphyl’s old website had nothing about ‘vampire’ anywhere on it,” Dr. Runels says. “My rep told me [that Aesthetic Factors] didn’t like that name and didn’t want anybody using it.”

Dr. Runels, who had been using Selphyl in conjunction with Juvederm, says he told the sales rep that he didn’t like the [‘vampire filler’] name either and promised to come up with a new title that would bring Selphyl to the top of search engine results and generate both sales of the product and bring patients to his door.

“I thought for about a week,” Dr. Runels explains. “I thought of a name for my combination. I said, ‘You know what? All women want to have sex with a vampire – I interviewed a novelist who writes vampire novels, and I have an answer for why that is – but they want to be *lifted*, not filled. So I said, ‘I’ll call it the ‘vampire facelift,’ and I was the first to use that [title]. I Googled it, zero hits – [so] I trademarked it and started calling my procedure that.’”

According to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, however, Dr. Runels filed for the trademark on Sept. 12, 2010 – nearly two months after the ABC report – though he did post a YouTube video on April 20, 2010, in which he uses the term. Aesthetic Factors filed for the trademark to “Vampire Filler” on December 2010, and “Vampire Facelift Technology” in August 2011 (Batra says his reason for trademarking the titles was to keep others from exploiting them).

In the realm of the immortal vampire, however, time and titles are of little consequence. Dr. Runels owns the name, and for anyone interested in joining the legion of approximately 200 physicians who are licensed to offer the Vampire FaceLift, it’s going to cost them \$97 per month for the privilege – but more on the financial terms of the business plan later.



Vlad the Injector

Though he presents himself as a genteel country doctor, Dr. Runels can be as cunning and charming as Dracula himself. He is both cognizant and complimentary of the plastic surgeons who will be reading this article, and he speaks passionately about how the changing medical landscape is squeezing physicians. He says he took up cosmetic medicine as a way to pay the bills, as he explains how he really just wants to help his fellow physicians by introducing them to a new way of doing business that is designed to level the playing field between those who practice medicine and the companies that sell it.

“I’m just an internist from Fairhope, Ala., so it’s a little offensive to people who wonder why I’m even doing something like this,” he says. “What I think plastic surgeons would be eager to hear – what they *need* to hear – is that it’s not about the procedure. The procedure is nice and it works, but it’s about the profit model.”

The “profit model” revolves around making the procedure larger than the sum of its parts. Essentially, by offering a well-known procedure rather than a well-known product, it keeps manufacturers from being able to dictate the terms of the injectable market. By offering a name-brand procedure rather than a name-brand product, Dr. Runels says physicians are better able to control price and offer patients more predictable results.

As part of the agreement with Eclipse, the distributor covers the monthly licensing fees paid to Dr. Runels on behalf of the physicians for whom it supplies the PRP used in the Vampire FaceLift (though physicians are welcome to license the name directly from Dr. Runels and use whatever HA and PRP they choose).

“The reason we got involved in it is because the media grabbed onto it and it gets a lot of public attention,” says Tom O’Brien, president of Eclipse. “Some doctors think it’s a goofy term and they don’t like it, but you don’t have to like the name – you just want to flow with market demand.”

“I don’t know where the hamburger comes from at Hardee’s, but I guarantee you they’ve bid it out to get the best meat at the best price. One of the reasons Eclipse was quick to jump in is because they are a distributor – they can swap PRPs too,” says Dr. Runels. “So far, Regen has been good to us, but if they start jacking us around on the price ... or for some reason the quality of their product goes down or something isn’t right about it, all concerned can dump them,

Night and day: The Vampire FaceLift website (top) is a sharp contrast to Selphyl’s approach (above). Charles Runels, MD, discusses the Vampire FaceLift in a YouTube video posted in 2010 (above left); a Google search describes Selphyl as “Vampire Facelift Technology” (left).

get another PRP and we keep talking about the same name – no need to reeducate patients. See how empowering that is for doctors?”

“Doctors haven’t been able to do that,” he adds. “When a new filler comes out, they have to re-market it and re-convince my patients that it’s what they should use.”

“Charles is a marketing guru,” says ASPS member Jon Grazer, MD, who began offering the Vampire FaceLift at his practice in Newport, Calif., about a year ago. “He took a lot of his own time and money to go to all of these seminars on how to do webinars, SEO and marketing.”

When questioned about the murky waters of industry compliance regulations and off-label promotion rules – specifically the potential for Eclipse or himself running afoul of the U.S. Justice Department – Dr. Runels says that he’s on the right side of an admittedly fine line.

“The FDA is watching this very carefully. A physician using his skill and knowledge and research can do something off-label, but the company cannot promote it off-label,” he says. “Eclipse and Regen are not promoting it for aesthetic use, but as a physician, I can.”

The waters grow murkier, however, considering that Eclipse is essentially compensating the physicians for using PRP off label by paying their licensing fees.

“We don’t claim ‘vampire’ does anything good or bad, it’s just a marketing term,” says O’Brien. “We’re very conservative about making medical claims. Since the license is owned by Dr. Runels, not Eclipse, we have the right to market the ‘vampire’ but we do not have the right to make medical claims, which we will not do.”

“I’m even further covered because this is not even a drug. This is not even a device ... it’s just blood,” Dr. Runels says. “It’s a procedure. Basically, I’m teaching a procedure using a device that was created for something else. That’s all it is.”

In fact, he points a finger at Aesthetic Concepts as the PRP company that drew the ire of the FDA for promoting Selphyl for off-label aesthetic use, including links to cosmetic surgeons who used Selphyl for aesthetic use, sponsorship of YouTube videos and several similarly themed potential infractions on the Selphyl website. A document from the

FDA's Office of Biologics and Quality Advertisement and Promotional Labeling Branch obtained by *PSN* shows that these issues were corrected to the satisfaction of the FDA and the case has been closed.

"We stick to our FDA approval, which is not for an aesthetic indication," says Batra. "When you look at the Eclipse website or the Vampire FaceLift website, they show photos of women before and after, they have a whole aesthetic claim. They are very crafty about it because they don't actually mention the name of the product."

Demystifying the Vampire FaceLift

The Vampire FaceLift is not as mysterious as its name implies. It involves injections of a hyaluronic acid filler followed by a PRP. The official procedure also includes an element of the mathematics of beauty to determine an optimal standard of facial topography and balance – and those who are licensed to offer it are listed on *vampirefacelift.com* – a site that generates more web traffic than even *Botox.com*, according to web analytics company Alexa (*alexa.com*).

"[The Vampire FaceLift website] certainly drives calls to the office, but you have to be up front with the patients and say this is not a facelift – it's a filler," says Dr. Grazer. "What you're really doing is volumizing with a hyaluronic acid and then filling around it with the PRP, which improves the tone, texture and color of the skin – but it takes eight to 10 weeks to really start to see a difference."

ASPS Alan Matarasso, MD, New York, does not offer the Vampire FaceLift in his practice, but he has been using Selphyl for nearly three years in conjunction with fillers, neurotoxins and lasers – to treat patients depending on their areas of need. He says Selphyl has been particularly effective in the infraorbital upper cheek area.

"Patients tolerate it very well and they like the results," he says. "It adds another tool for us for volumizing – but none of these in injectables are giving you a facelift. That's a misrepresentation. Lifts *lift* and fillers *fill*. This is a wonderful addition to what we can offer patients, but when patients need surgery, they need surgery."

Dr. Stagers, who has been offering the Vampire FaceLift in his practice for three months, says his patients have so far been satisfied but agrees that the procedure is no substitute for surgery. "It's a fairly quick procedure, and it has received a significant amount of visibility in the national media about the name," he says. "Is it a big thing? The answer is no – at least in my practice, it's not. But people are interested and it provides a significant volume of fill material with minimal bruising. From a practical standpoint, the application that I personally see with it is as a quick fix short of a surgical intervention – and if people like it, they can stick with it until they're ready for surgery."

"The plastics guys are very possessive of the term 'facelift' because that name came out before there were fillers," says Dr. Runels. "There are many things that you can do with surgery that you cannot do with a filler, but, in truth, a filler lifts the face out away from the bone, and the surgical facelift collapses it. We should acknowledge the fact that fillers do lift and sculpt the face, and facelifts also lift the jowl line and have a lifting effect, but there's a surgical facelift and there's a filler-type facelift. There are people who are good at both, and some are good at one or the other, so I don't think we have to fight too much over names."

"One of the problems with these 'injectable facelifts' is that they are overstuffing the sausage," says Dr. Matarasso. "There is a role for all of these different things – both surgical and nonsurgical – and

I tell people that if you had all the time and money in the world, and your greatest concern was your appearance, you would be doing a little bit of both. These procedures complement and enhance each other – they don't replace each other. And when you think that one is going to replace the other, you're going to be disappointed."

"It's not a replacement for a facelift," agrees O'Brien. "It's a marketing term for people who want to buy some time – because we're all going to need a facelift eventually."

"He's not at the level of a plastic surgeon," O'Brien adds, referring to Dr. Runels. "But he has learned something that is really pretty interesting and that's the ability to strategically place PRP and HA where minimal product is used but dramatic improvements are possible. It's a conservative approach that gets him a lot of bang for his buck. A lot of doctors who train under him come back amazed at how much he knows."

"He is kind of like the master at miserly filler in that he gets more volumization out of one syringe of hyaluronic acid than anyone I've seen," says Dr. Grazer. "He's not doing anything magic – he's just placing it in the right anatomical places."

"The few people that I have done early on feel like they have lost a moderate amount of their volume – they are still satisfied with it, but to listen to Charlie [Runels] talk about it, he says it will last up to about nine months or so. I'm not sure I believe that," says Dr. Stagers. "Charlie has a secondary gain in all of his hype. He's selling a product and benefiting from the recurring sales of participation in that website, so he's going to make money down the road on everybody that he can keep on that website."

"I have nothing but good things to say about Charlie," he adds. "I don't think he's a charlatan – I just think he's a little more of a cheerleader for a reasonable procedure that doesn't quite live up to what it says."

Who can do it?

While Dr. Runels says he will not grant a license to perform his procedure to just anyone, his screening process seems less rigorous than his protection of the franchise's name. Essentially, he says that he can assess a physician's or nurse injector's competence with Juvederm through conversation and by looking at their websites. Dr. Runels says he can teach the rest either in person or online.

"I've never turned down a physician because they know better – they're not gonna want to be jacking somebody up with something they don't understand," Dr. Runels says. "You know who's competent. I'm not going to grade their paper."

For plastic surgeons who pride themselves on rigorous training and evidence-based practices, bristle at the notion of proprietary medical procedures and want to avoid associating cosmetic medicine with things that go bump in the night, the Vampire FaceLift may remain in the shadows.

"Some of the more conservative practices don't want to talk about the 'vampire' – they want to talk about PRP, and that's kind of what I do," admits Dr. Grazer. "I just talk about it as platelet-rich plasma."

With PRP being used in conjunction with fillers, fat grafting, lasers and other techniques, and additional "vampire" branded PRP-based techniques entering the market – including hair transplant, laser procedures and even a Vampire BreastLift – it's a monster that may continue to haunt Batra with each successive media blitz.

"If I could have bought that term from him, I would have bought it and buried it so no one could use it," he says.

Vampires, however, have an uncanny ability to rise from the dead. **PSN**

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