

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Howes' Illnesses of the Famous: *Michael Jackson - Part 1 of 2*”

Being a plastic surgeon, I had empathy and a certain fascination with the changing face of Michael Jackson. Photographs over the years revealed the rather drastic transformation of his physical appearance and like many others, he usually denied having multiple plastic surgery procedures. But, his denial fooled no one. Obvious changes popped up with his pinched-tip nose, his squared off jaw line, his chin implants and dimple creation, his widened and tattooed doe eyes and his bleached skin tone. Jackson's face morphed into a striking and shocking contrast from his former self. During his child molestation trial, news stories flashed photos of his sculptured cherubic face that had little resemblance to his childhood photos. So, what was going on? According to biographer, J. Randy Taraborrelli, "He didn't want to be Michael Joseph Jackson. He just wanted to be something else. And he went about the business of doing that." Michael's ailment is called "body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)," which is defined as a condition or form of body hatred that often paralyzes its sufferers with shame, embarrassment, and even disgust, forcing them to seek surgical changes to it. The American Psychiatric Association describes it as “a preoccupation in some imagined defect in personal appearance, or an excessive concern with a minor physical irregularity. The preoccupation causes significant distress or impairment.” In short, they hate the image they see in the mirror and it can lead to suicide. The tormented "King of Pop" was an extreme talent, who many called a "one of a kind." But, Michael had many other eccentricities and illnesses. Reportedly, as a result of two disfiguring diseases (lupus and vitiligo), he had his scalp, eyebrows, and eyelashes tattooed with dark pigment in order to disguise the recurring loss of hair and skin pigment in those areas. He also had treatments to his face to help restore the damage caused by his lupus lesions and skin rashes. He unsuccessfully tried to surgically treat acne scars and a 1984 scalp burn and tried to use light therapy (PUVA) to restore lost skin pigmentation. That's when he started wearing long sleeves, the glove and heavy makeup. A quote of Tom Chiarella, in Esquire Magazine stated, “I never liked the glove, although when I saw his monstrous hand, I got it. And I admired what he'd done to cover it up. It was never clear to me if that hurt or not, but I imagine it did. Think about the beauty of that. Putting sequins on your open wounds. Think about the entire world staring at the one thing that makes you feel most ugly.”

In the America I love, the King of Pop and 9 million others tragically struggle with BDD.

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