

# Breaking the Baldness Barrier

By Hiroyuki Yamamuro

**T**he never-ending progress of science and technology has made it possible for man to reform and restore his body. Nara Prefectural Medical College used artificial fibers to repair a torn Achilles' tendon, a procedure long considered impossible. Pacemakers, meanwhile, assist the functions of the human heart, while personal computers can mimic some of the workings of the brain. Eyeglasses and contact lenses can make up for failing eyesight, and ceramic teeth make a virtually permanent substitute for natural teeth. But while there seems to be no end to such examples, there is one thing medical science still can't do: it cannot bring back lost hair.

Or can it? For Japanese adepts of the "reed-screen" hairdo, allowing the last remaining strands of side hair to grow long and slinging them right-to-left across their shining scalps, last fall brought sensational news from Beijing.

## Hair-growing tours

Chinese researchers, it seemed, had finally done it. They had found a cure for baldness. First, a television program reported that a herbal hair tonic with the cryptic name "101" had proved almost 100% effective in clinical tests conducted in China.

By January, weekly magazines were filled with articles on the effects of "101." When the medical doctor who had invented "101" visited Japan in March, the Chinese hair tonic boom reached its peak. Travel agents, beginning with a company in Shibuya, Tokyo, lost no time in organizing "hair-growing" tours to China. At a cost of ¥397,000 (about \$3,180 at the rate of ¥125/\$) for four days and three nights, the first tour's quota of 20 people was filled the moment it was announced. Nearly 1,000 Japanese have already visited China on "hair-growing" tours.

The hair consulting office that turned "101" into an overnight sensation hardly looks the part. Housed in a small building in Beijing with only 10 meters or so of frontage, it has a front entrance fitted with a door made from iron bars, and a



A wide range of hair tonics, like the one shown here, are in use in Japan. Now a new Chinese cure promises victory in the unending battle with receding hairlines.

staff of 13 doctors. "An average of 200 Chinese come here every day," explains one of the staff. "Our Japanese visitors, including those coming on package tours, exceed 500 a month. That's too many to treat in our office, so we have seven doctors scurrying from hotel to hotel to attend to the Japanese visitors."

The office receives nearly 200 letters from Japan daily. Some include pictures of the correspondent's bald head and ask in Chinese for detailed instructions and advice. Others simply write, "Send me '101,'" much to the annoyance of the harried consultation staff.

Bottles of "101" are selling like hotcakes. A Kyoto company importing "101" gets 200,000 bottles annually from the lucky Hong Kong company which holds exclusive export rights. The importer then distributes the "101" at ¥11,000 (\$88) per bottle to individuals who have paid an annual membership fee of ¥5,000. Since the price in China works out at about ¥525 (\$4.2) a bottle, there is a markup of 20 times as soon as it crosses the sea. But that is not deterring desperate customers. In fact, posters have appeared in the Roppongi and Shimbashi districts of Tokyo hinting that contraband "101" is available, for a price.

The hair tonic boom in Japan was actually ignited in 1982. That was when leading cosmetics maker Shiseido started

plugging "Medicinal Furorin" (literally meaning "never-dying forest") on television. Later, Kanebo's "Medicinal Shidenkai" ("reform with flashes of lightning") emerged as a competitor to Shiseido's tonic. According to a survey by the Japan Cosmetic Industry Association, the annual value of hair tonic shipments leapt from about ¥15 billion to ¥23 billion. Soon tonics were being brought out by every cosmetics maker, pushing sales past ¥30 billion a year. With the addition of "101," industry analysts predict a ¥100 billion market within a few years. Since overall sales of cosmetics in 1987 registered only a minimal 0.3% increase over the preceding year to ¥1,147.7 billion, with sales of perfumes and facial creams actually decreasing, the 8.1% surge in hair tonic sales is little short of remarkable.

## Mental stress

Behind the rapid growth, it would seem, is a society filled with Japanese-style frustration.

Last year, a leading wig maker surveyed parents of children aged 15 or younger about hair problems. Of the 440 respondents, 241 were women. Analyzing the results of the survey, one scholar concluded that "daughters whose mothers are strict about manners and discipline and scold them constantly are very prone to hair loss." Yet another survey, this time by a cosmetics company, found that a quarter of hair tonic purchasers are men in their early 30s whose hair is "not yet very thin." The Japan Hair Science Association's own analysis of this result was that "increasing mental stress makes young men look to hair tonic." The association estimates that as many as 6 million Japanese are seriously worried about loss of hair.

That would suggest that the real answer to hair problems is not to be found in a bottle of 101, but in the spirit. But if science has problems already covering the shining pate, it may take even longer to find a cure for the human heart. ■

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