

The Painting Psoriasis Project

43%
of patients surveyed
say that psoriasis
has affected their
relationships.

By Sam Hanna, MD

It became clear that the woman at the next table was subtly (actually, not so subtly) staring at my arm. More specifically, the “lesion” that covered most of it. My recently acquired skin affliction was an expertly painted half-tiger’s face that extended from the back of my hand to beyond my wrist, blending from there into realistically rendered plaques of psoriasis.

I had eagerly agreed to take part in the Painting Psoriasis Project while at the Canadian Dermatology Association (CDA) Annual Conference in Fredericton in June. The idea was to raise disease awareness, while simultaneously letting those of us not affected by chronic skin disease to “walk a mile in the shoes” of those who were. I thought that, as a dermatologist, this would afford me some insight into what my patients experience. To be honest, however, I was dubious. But I did think that it would be interesting and maybe fun—and, anyway, I could wash my rash off at the end of the day.

“Is she looking at me?”

At first, I eagerly showed off my body art to colleagues and passersby. When I was directing the ogling it was fun, a conversation starter and an interesting experience. Then two things

happened. The first was my lunchtime encounter. Sitting with a friend and colleague for lunch, having a private conversation, I could feel the eyes of

my neighbour on me. I hadn’t invited and she hadn’t asked—she was just looking, sideways but obviously enough. I think what made me notice was a pause in conversation at the woman’s own table.

She stopped talking to secretly stare at me. Once aware of her attention I was able to engage with her and explain my temporary affliction but, without that, I was clearly and awkwardly on display.

The second enlightening event occurred not too long after. I was

standing at a podium in front of my colleagues at the CDA’s annual general meeting. As secretary of the board, I had several official duties to attend to and reports to present. While normally I would wear a suit to this event, on that day, to show off my “ink,” I was in a golf shirt.

Standing at the podium, I realized that I was unintentionally hiding my arms behind the structure.

Again, my guard was down and my self-consciousness bloomed. This was a room of colleagues and friends but, still, I was aware of being watched—seen not for me or what I was saying, but for what was emblazoned on my skin.

An insight

I loved the artistry of what was painted on my skin. It was beautiful and expertly portrayed. I look at those pictures now and find the imagery striking. Yet I was surprised at the degree of relief that came with washing away my skin “disease.” When I volunteered for the project, I had expected at most some trite, symbolic insights into my patients’ lives. Instead, in the small moments when I was distracted and unaware, the reality of being seen for what was on my skin—instead of for who I am—was driven home. I am lucky; my skin changes lasted less than a day. For

my patients, their psoriasis, eczema, acne, rosacea or scars will often last a lifetime, occurring and re-occurring for everyone to see.

The Painting Psoriasis Project was a genuinely eye-opening experience, and one in which I am pleased and proud to have played a part. 

