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HOME | B5

Leaving no holes in the chase for jobs

Stigma of large ear piercings forcing job aspirants to go under the knife

By KASH CHEONG

WHEN Faiz was 24, he got curious about "gauged ears" - ear piercings which can be the size of a 50-cent coin or larger.

"I wanted to try it for myself," said Faiz, who used cone-shaped equipment called tapers to stretch the holes in his ear lobes.

But when he later tried to get a job as a trucker, his stretched ear lobes, with holes the size of bottle caps, hurt his chances. "I went to six interviews and didn't get a job. This is even with recommendations and five years of experience," he said. "Interviewers just gave me that look."

Two years ago, he spent about \$3,000 to fix his lobes.

Plastic surgeons in private practice The Straits Times spoke to said that over the last three years, they have seen about three cases each of people looking to fix their enlarged ear piercings every year, and expect the numbers to rise.

"Most of our locals who enlarge their ear lobes tend to be relatively young," said The Sloane Clinic's Dr Tan Ying Chien. "They would seek such surgery only when they start looking for proper jobs, and most of them may still have not reached that age yet."

Changi General Hospital has also done about five such surgical procedures a year in recent years, said its ear, nose and throat consultant, Dr Ian Loh.

Gauged ears, if not cared for diligently, can get infected, doctors say. A mix of sea salt and water is used to prevent this.

Human resources (HR) experts say enlarged earlobes, also known as "flesh tunnels", could be hurdles in the chase for jobs, especially front-end ones, outside the nightclub and creative industries.

"Employers usually associate such symbols with night life," said Mr David Leong, managing director of HR firm People Worldwide. "Some employers are not open

to extensive tattoos, so we usually advise clients to cover them at job interviews." It is even harder to hide gauged ears. "But it boils down to individual employers' values," Mr Leong said.

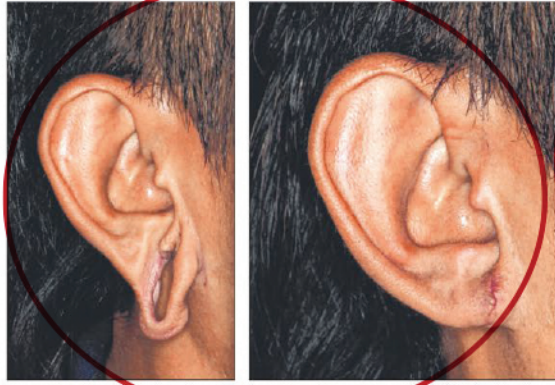
However, jobs are not the only reason to repair the ear lobes. Art student Luke, 24, went for national service and could not wear any accessories to keep his stretched piercings in place.

"They ended up looking saggy and deformed," said Luke, who stretched his piercings to look like stars from his favourite bands. He went for surgery last year.

Both Faiz and Luke did not want their real names used, because of the stigma they felt was associated with gauged ears.

Disapproval from spouses or even in-laws has led others to go for surgery. "My most memorable case was that of a young man getting married," said Dr Loh. "His potential father-in-law... insisted on him getting the ear lobe repaired before the wedding."

Surgery to close such gauged ears can cost around \$3,000 for



Reconstruction of a gauged earlobe involves using the patient's own tissue and can cost around \$3,000 for both sides. PHOTOS: TAN YING CHIEN

both sides. It involves reconstructing a normal ear lobe with the patient's own tissue. "The only

side effect might be a small scar, which heals with time," said Dr Leo Kah Woon, who practises at

Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre. Faiz, now 34 and a trucker, said surgery has made a huge differ-

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ence in first impressions.

"Previously, parents would take their kids away from me when they saw me at the playground," he said. "I didn't expect so much stigma. Gauged ears are ultimately an individual's choice, but if you really want to try it out, consider family, friends and your job prospects too." kash@sp.com.sg

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Reconstruction of a gauged ear lobe involves using the patient's own tissue and can cost around \$3,000 for both sides. PHOTOS: TAN YING CHIEN

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