

A perfect storm: Adolescent changing voice and acne medications

Pat H. Wilson

Studio note

As a specialist teacher working in theatre voice and musical theatre training, my studio includes a high proportion of late adolescent students, many of whom have career aspirations focussing on Broadway and/or Hollywood. While working on the development of their singing voices, they are also honing a range of acting monologues and keeping up at least two dance classes a week, while checking that their choices comply with audition requirements for major national and international tertiary training institutions offering full-time undergraduate theatre and music theatre training. Many Australian singing teachers and voice coaches have students of this kind in their care. Over the past 20 years, I have observed my theatre and music theatre students to have a growing reliance on heavy-duty acne medications. In their late adolescence to early twenties, they are acutely appearance-conscious; they want to be taken seriously in the image-driven industries of theatre, film and television.

ISOTRETINOIN

On the topic of acne therapies, Olutunmbi, Paley & English (2008) observe, "Treatment options are vast, and include topical retinoids, topical and systemic antibiotics, oral isotretinoin, and hormonal treatments for women." However, it seems to me that no other treatment attracts the range and volume of comment as the oral medication isotretinoin (13-cis retinoic acid, Accutane, Roaccutane, Oratane).

Isotretinoin was first cleared for use by the FDA in America in 1982. It became available in Australia not long afterwards. Initially, it was prescribed as a treatment of last resort for acne sufferers who had tried everything else. Isotretinoin has a long list of adverse side-effects (Bigby & Stern, 1988; Fraunfelder, LaBraico & Meyer, 1985; Hull & Demkiw-Bartel, 2000; McLane, 2001). In 1998, a number of medical studies (Jick, Kremers, & Vasilakis-Scaramozza,

2000; O'Donnell, 2003) suggested a link between isotretinoin usage and depression, psychosis and suicidal thoughts. In 2008, it was the subject of American lawsuits (Crockett, Porter, Martin, Sandler, & Kappelman, 2010; Femia & Vleugels, 2013), which cited it as a direct cause of inflammatory bowel disease. In the following year, the manufacturer voluntarily withdrew the drug from the market. Despite much research, discussion and litigation, isotretinoin is still available worldwide as an acne treatment.

Many medications have adverse effects on the voice; excellent reference material (Sataloff, Hawkshaw, & Anticaglia, 2006; Abaza, Levy, Hawkshaw, & Sataloff 2007) already exists for singing teachers and vocal coaches. One of the side-effects of isotretinoin is a drying effect on the mucous membranes of the respiratory system (Busso & Serrano 2005; Petitpain, Pouaha, Cosserat, Gambier, Truchetet & Cuny, 2006). Although this is a common side effect of many medications, few of them need to be taken continuously over a 20-week period. This is frequently the case with isotretinoin.

Further research needed

There have already been a number of investigations into the nature and range of isotretinoin side-effects (Charakida, Mouser, & Chu, 2004; Thiboutot & Gollnick, 2009; Zaenglein & Thiboutot, 2006). I would expect that much information of direct usefulness to singers, actors, singing teachers and voice coaches would be gained from an observational prospective study investigating dysphonia and isotretinoin.

CONCLUSION

It is my belief that, when working with the developing late adolescent voice, it is easy to perceive hoarseness and vocal limitation as mere by-products of the student's age and vocal maturation. In the interests of best-practice voice

care, I suggest that it may also be worth determining whether the student is on an isotretinoin type of acne medication.

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BIOGRAPHY

Singer, pianist, actress, singing teacher, vocal coach, author, composer, lyricist and musical director in theatre. **Pat H. Wilson** has sung and played in more piano bars than she can decently name, composed much original music for television and theatre, and co-writes and performs original satirical revues with her friend and partner, Adrian Barnes.

She has a Masters of Applied Science, having undertaken scientific research into singing at the University of Sydney, and was part of a team of singing teachers and scientists who developed the unique singers' software, *Sing&See*. Pat continues to research, write and publish in areas of voice science and rehabilitation.

Pat teaches singing in the Drama Department of Flinders University, as well as in her studio in Adelaide; her specialisation is teaching singers to act and actors to sing - preparing performers for professional theatre and music theatre. She is the author of the popular textbook, *The Singing Voice: An Owner's Manual* (2nd edition recently published), and co-author with Dr Jean Callaghan of *How to sing and see: Singing pedagogy in the digital era*.