

# Norman Orentreich, 96, Force Behind Hair Transplants, Dies

Dr. Norman Orentreich in the mid-1950s during an appearance on the television program “World of Medicine.” His research showed the viability of transplanting hair to a bald scalp. Carroll Weiss, via Merck Archival Services

By **Natasha Singer**

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By the 1950s, men had been seeking — and failing to find — a remedy for hair loss since at least 1550 B.C., when [doctors in ancient Egypt](#) recommended anointing bald scalps with the fat of a Nubian ibex or a crushed black lizard boiled in oil.

Then along came a young dermatologist named [Norman Orentreich](#), who tried an experiment: transplanting hair from the back of the head to the scalp. And lo, the transplanted hair grew.

Thanks in part to his discovery, a multibillion-dollar [global hair transplant industry](#) now exists to provide long-term relief for receding hairlines. His breakthrough also established him as a maverick in cosmetic medicine and a magnet for media coverage, and it ultimately embedded hair plugs in American culture as a totem of male midlife crises — as well as the butt of late-night television jokes.

Dr. Orentreich (pronounced OR-en-trike), who died on Jan. 23 at 96, went on to develop other cosmetic countermeasures for aging, but not without controversy. One of his novel treatments — injecting tiny droplets of liquid silicone in the skin to smooth facial wrinkles — raised concerns among some of his peers and drew regulatory scrutiny.

In the early 1990s, the Food and Drug Administration said it was [illegal](#) to inject silicone, a durable substance that over time [may cause ridges in the skin](#) and discoloration, and ordered Dr. Orentreich to [stop injecting](#) it into people.

Dr. Orentreich’s pioneering approach and personal attention drew actors, artists, models, publishing executives and other high-profile clients to his office, the Orentreich Medical Group, on Fifth Avenue on Manhattan’s Upper East Side.

New York Magazine in 1968 described a reporter overhearing Dr. Orentreich tell his nurse that Cary Grant was “not to be kept waiting.” In his diaries, Andy Warhol recounted making an office visit, accompanied by the novelist Truman Capote, in which “Dr. Orentreich gave us free samples” and then “removed the veins from my nose.”

[Helen Gurley Brown](#), the editor of Cosmopolitan magazine, once described Dr. Orentreich’s treatments as insider beauty secrets.

“I have very fragile hair, and I go to Dr. Orentreich once a month for injections, and that place is wall to wall people,” Ms. Brown [told Interview Magazine](#) in 1973. “A lot of them are famous, but of course he ushers them right in and out. But do you think any of these people will admit what they are having done?”

In addition to transplants and injections, Dr. Orentreich often prescribed face creams and other products of his own devising.

In 1967, his views on maintaining youthful skin — and his status as a skin-care guru to many boldfaced names — attracted splashy coverage in Vogue magazine. The article was headlined, “Can Great Skin Be Created?”

Soon, Leonard A. Lauder of Estée Lauder, the cosmetics company founded by his mother, recruited Dr. Orentreich — along with [the Vogue editor](#), Carol Phillips, who had written the article — to help create Clinique, a clinical skin-care line for younger women.

Introduced in 1968, the brand came in antiseptic-looking packages and used clinical-sounding phrases like “allergy-tested.” Its beauty counter salespeople wore white lab coats. Dr. Orentreich even helped devise a beauty counter [“Clinique Computer,”](#) a device using algorithms to determine a customer’s skin type.

Clinique quickly became a department store blockbuster. Its best-selling product, [Dramatically Different Moisturizing Lotion](#), was based on one of Dr. Orentreich’s formulas, and buying it at a beauty counter became [a rite of passage](#) for many teenage girls.

It was the second multibillion-dollar market that he had a hand in advancing. Today, American beauty products that apply ideas from dermatology to promote skin health or treat problems like acne are cosmetic industry staples.

Dr. Norman Orentreich in 2011. His private Fifth Avenue practice drew actors, artists, models, publishing executives and other high-profile clients.  
H&H Photographers, via Orentreich Foundation

“We were the first, we were the inventor of it — and anyone else is a wannabe,” Mr. Lauder, now the chairman emeritus of the Estée Lauder Companies, said in a telephone interview.

Although Dr. Orentreich’s name was not listed on Clinique’s products, his role as its guiding dermatologist paved the way decades later for entrepreneurial plastic surgeons and dermatologists to develop and market skin-care brands under their own names.

“He was the groundbreaker there,” said [Dr. Michael Kane](#), a plastic surgeon in New York who had patients in common with Dr. Orentreich and who started his own skin-care line, [Kane NY](#).

Norman Orentreich was born on Dec. 26, 1922, in Manhattan and, with his younger brother, Seymour, grew up in tenements on the Lower East Side.

His father, David Orentreich, an immigrant from Austria, was a tailor in the

garment district. His mother, Anna Scheiner, from Poland, ran a store selling household items.

Dr. Orentreich's entrepreneurial bent emerged early on. He learned to drive when he was 13 during the Great Depression, and earned money parking cars.

He graduated from Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan in 1939 and from City College of New York with a bachelor's in biology and chemistry.

While he was an undergraduate, Dr. Orentreich met his future wife, Roslyn Seidner, who was in high school. He was 19 and she was 16. The meeting had been arranged by their parents. Her father, a furrier, had met his father through the garment industry.

Dr. Orentreich received an introduction to medicine after he was drafted into the Navy during World War II. From 1943 to 1945, he was stationed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he served in the Navy Medical Corps as a pharmacist's mate, helping medical officers examine recruits.

After the war he attended what is now the New York University School of Medicine, graduating in 1948. From 1950 to 1953 he did postgraduate training in dermatology at the N.Y.U. Medical Center's skin and cancer unit. He became head of the unit's hair clinic in 1953.

But the medical understanding of hair loss was still in its early stages, and the young doctor had few treatments to offer. To learn more about hair growth and loss, he devised a research study, in which he punched out small circles of skin from the back and front of men's scalps. He then transplanted the hair that he had removed from the back of the head to bald areas in the front.

He soon discovered that the hair he had transplanted from the "donor zone" kept growing, as if it was still in its original place. He termed this phenomenon "donor dominance."

It was a eureka moment. And it led Dr. Orentreich to begin developing hair transplantation surgery as a viable, medically proven treatment.

But his idea was so revolutionary that a major dermatology journal declined to publish his research. It was eventually published in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, in 1959. Over the decades, other doctors would refine hair transplantation surgery.

Dr. Orentreich kept innovating. In the 1970s, he created [a skin exfoliation](#) sponge made out of soft, synthetic mesh. The 3M company bought the patent and developed the product as the [Buf-Puf](#).

He also established the [Orentreich Foundation](#) for the Advancement of Science, which studies aging, in the Hudson River village of Cold Spring, N.Y.

His son, Dr. David Orentreich, said his father died of complications of pneumonia in Manhattan. In addition to him, he is survived by two daughters, Dr. Catherine Orentreich and Sari Mass, and four grandchildren. David and Catherine Orentreich, both dermatologists, continue to run their father's practice and also consult for Clinique.



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