

People in pain turn to cupping therapy

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William Poole lies face down, his upper back peppered with small jars that suck up skin turned red underneath them. One by one, Dr. Joseph Chiang removes the jars, lights a quickly extinguished flame in them and swiftly applies the jars to other spots. He does it effortlessly, like a master illusionist performing sleight of hand.

“That feels better,” says Poole at the end. “I feel looser already.”

The therapy is an ancient Chinese one called cupping, but if the scene conjures up images of a dark room in an unfamiliar neighborhood, think again. It occurred at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, epitome of the conventional cancer-care establishment.

Place ... of Wellness, M.D. Anderson’s integrative medicine program, offers unconventional care, from meditation to yoga to aromatherapy. But for many people, cupping has become a therapy of choice, suddenly trendy after actress Gwyneth Paltrow’s high-profile use of it earlier this year.

Used by acupuncturists in China since the third century B.C., cupping is considered most beneficial for back pain and stiff shoulders because it increases circulation and the mobility of affected areas. But it’s also pronounced good for digestive and respiratory disorders and sports injuries.

For cancer patients such as Poole, it eases the discomfort that can come with chemotherapy and radiation.

Massagelike effects

Cupping may look like medieval alchemy, but its effect is similar to that of an intense, vigorous massage. Suction created by the cups pulls the skin up and increases blood flow. Patients describe the feeling as a pulling of the skin.

Practitioners remove oxygen from the cups and create negative pressure with fire, the old way, or suction, the new way. In the latter, vacuum guns inserted into valves on top of the cups remove oxygen and create a seal.

The effect from fire is considered stronger, but Chiang must use vacuum guns at M.D. Anderson because fire codes prohibit the use of flames. (As a demonstration last week, he used the fire technique on Poole, who was quick to note the difference.)

“The great thing about it is that it relieves pain without any side effects,” says Chiang, a Taiwan-born, U.S.-trained anesthesiologist who also is a licensed acupuncturist. “And it lasts for weeks.”

The closest thing to a side effect is the bruises cupping can leave.

Indeed, Paltrow stirred interest because she wore a strapless dress to a movie premiere revealing dark, circular marks across her back. Someone called them “the hickey marks seen around the world.”

Chiang says he minimizes the bruising by removing the jars after a couple of minutes and reapplying them elsewhere, unlike most therapists, who'll typically leave them in the same spot for 15 to 20 minutes.

That often leaves red or purple bruises for a week or more. But even with the bruising, cupping doesn't cause pain. Most patients say they enjoy the feeling, Chiang says.

And if little scientific study has been done on cupping, it is nevertheless being accepted by physicians, as well as patients, as an effective means of pain control, Chiang says. He also notes that acupuncture and cupping are so much more effective for tennis elbow than steroid injections that they've become his preferred treatment option.

Training in Taiwan

Chiang has been cupping people since training as an acupuncturist in Taiwan in 1996. He started using it on M.D. Anderson patients in 1998 — though interest has never been as keen as now.

Among Chiang's first cupping patients was Jeanne Brelsford, who was diagnosed with advanced sarcoma in 1998. She's had regular acupuncture and cupping sessions for relief of pain after surgery to remove five ribs and half of her left lung.

"The first time cupping was described to me, it seemed quite odd," says Brelsford, who four years later was diagnosed with lymphoma.

"But at that point I was ready to try anything, and now I love it. I'll always have some pain, but now it's livable, and I have to take far less pain medication."

Chiang is a minority among physician-acupuncturists, according to the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture, an organization of Western physicians trained in acupuncture.

Most such doctors do not do cupping, an organization spokesman said.

From animal horn to glass

Although forms of it are found in many old Western cultures too, cupping is first and foremost a practice of traditional Chinese medicine. The first cups were animal horns, and the next generation were made of bamboo or pottery. Only in the 20th century were the current glass cups developed.

Depending on how many cups are applied, cupping can take anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour and costs from \$50 to \$100. At M.D. Anderson's Place ... of Wellness, where Chiang usually uses it in conjunction with acupuncture — patients must be from M.D. Anderson — it costs \$65. To Chiang's patients, it's worth it.

"I think cupping should be an integral part of cancer treatment," says Poole, a tongue cancer survivor whose treatment caused soreness of the neck and shoulder twitching. "It's made a world of difference for me."