



Dr. Fred Hui uses cupping, a traditional Oriental technique, to draw more blood to the affected area. (EDWARD REGAN/The Globe and Mail)

Dousing the fire of shingles

BY WALLACE IMMEN
 Medical Reporter

HE can laugh about it now, but for months Cyril Watson was in so much pain from shingles he felt he was continually on fire.

"I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't even wear a shirt," said the 84-year-old from Port Perry, Ont.

As with thousands of other Canadians, shingles had left his nerves so raw that any movement caused excruciating pain. Until now, treatments offered only short reprieves from months or years of pain.

But new experimental approaches are offering hope for taming one of the most common forms of chronic pain.

"Once you've got shingles pain, there is no great treatment for it. At age 75, a person with shingles is likely to have a 50-per-cent chance of having pain for a year or more," said Dr. Charles Lynde, a specialist in dermatology at the Toronto Hospital. Shingles is the most common cause of chronic nerve pain and at least 50,000 new cases are reported in Canada each year.

"We need something to help these people," said Dr. Peter Watson (no relation to Cyril Watson), assistant professor of medicine at the University of Toronto, who is beginning a clinical trial of a drug that eases the pain in patients who have suffered for months.

The drug, venlafaxine hydrochloride (sold in Canada as Effexor), is a newly approved antidepressant that acts to increase the levels of natural pain-killers in the nervous system, Dr. Watson said. The most commonly used antidepressants, including Prozac, don't have this effect.

Dr. Watson is collaborating with several U.S. researchers in the clinical trial, which is just beginning. In preliminary tests, some shingles patients found their pain subsided and they could quit the drug, but some may have to take the medication indefinitely, he said.

New remedies using drugs and traditional methods offer hope to chronic-pain sufferers.

"If this works for shingles pain, it could also be useful for other persistent pain," including phantom limb pain and other kinds of nerve injuries, Dr. Watson believes.

Dr. Fred Hui, a Toronto practitioner, is taking another approach. Dr. Hui, who has also trained in traditional Chinese medicine, says a combination of Western treatments with Oriental techniques such as acupuncture and herbal medicines to strengthen the body can bring rapid relief.

Dr. Hui describes his approach as like pushing a car that is stuck in the snow. "One person can't budge it, but several teaming up can overcome the problem."

None of the treatments used alone cures the pain, but he reports that 60 per cent of the 200 patients he has treated for difficult, severe shingles pain have had full recovery. Another 20 per cent have rated their pain greatly improved. Those who weren't cured often dropped out of the treatment before they could have felt an effect, he said.

"I was at wit's end when I saw an item about Dr. Hui's treatment in a seniors' paper," Cyril Watson said. "I had gone to a number of doctors and didn't get very good results. The only thing some doctors could suggest is take a pain killer and go to bed."

He said a skin specialist prescribed pills and sunburn lotion, which did not help.

After 11 treatments from Dr. Hui, "I feel all right; you can pinch it and it doesn't hurt. I'm able to sleep better and I can take a shower without pain."

Dr. Lynde said that while Dr. Hui's report of almost immediate results sounds "pretty remarkable. I would treat it with healthy skepticism." Dr. Lynde said that acupuncture is one of the treatments that is used against shingles, "but

by no means does it help everybody."

Dr. Lynde worked on clinical trials of two new drugs that reduce the amount of nerve damage the virus causes if they are given within 72 hours of the beginning of the infection.

But Dr. Watson said that people who get the infection often don't realize how serious it is and delay seeing a doctor until the damage is already done.

Shingles is caused by varicella zoster, the virus that causes chicken pox, one of the most infectious childhood diseases. A child's immune system develops a defence, but some virus remains dormant at the base of the nerves and can re-emerge if the body's immune defences are low because of age or illness.

No one is sure why, but shingles infections commonly occur either on the forehead or on the mid chest. Itchy, scaly blisters form that last a few weeks and then heal, but the infection leaves nerve endings sensitive to the slightest pressure.

When Dr. Hui asks new patients to rate their pain they typically say it is between eight to 10 on a 10-point scale.

His program generally continues daily treatments for 10 days or until the patient reports that the pain is gone. "I tell patients if it is not getting better in five days they can quit. But usually by the third day the pump is primed; the patient gets such improvement he won't let me quit the treatment."

Sister Bertha McKerin, one of Dr. Hui's patients, said her pain was "close to 10" for two months but it was gone after a week of the doctor's treatments. The pain meant she could hardly walk and couldn't do her work with the Catholic Sisters of the Good Shepherd in North York.

"I still have some soreness but I

can work and do things I was doing before," Sister McKerin said. She has returned to looking after the dining room of the Catholic order which helps women and girls and supports foreign missions.

Dr. Hui said his approach begins by using a German medical technique that injects a local anesthetic to temporarily numb the nerve. He explained that this is like turning off a computer to reboot it.

Oriental approaches to stimulate the body's defences are used next. Acupuncture needles are inserted at points along the nerve and, at some acupuncture points, Dr. Hui pricks the skin to draw some blood. "This sends a small emergency signal that rallies the body's repair crews to the spot," he explained. Cupping, a technique that uses a flame to burn the oxygen out of a glass cup and create a vacuum, is also used. The suction on the skin draws more circulation to the area.

But success in the treatment depends on having a good repair crew, Dr. Hui said. Many of his patients need something to pep up their immune system, so he might prescribe a combination of inexpensive Chinese herbs and tablets to improve the body's healing processes.

The treatment must be individualized to the body type and constitution and that will make his results difficult to prove in a large-scale double-blind study, Dr. Hui said.

"I've made 80 per cent of people feel much better," he noted. "If a drug company can make 40 per cent of sufferers of a disease feel better that's considered a great discovery."

His fees for consultation and injections are covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan, although the costs of the acupuncture, cupping and herbs and other specific treatments must be paid by the patient. Acupuncture treatments cost about \$40 a session.