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Painless remedy for those in pain

Sonotron therapy uses sound energy to reduce inflammation and alleviate pain, reports MELISSA HENG

IT'S a little known secret that may not remain one much longer: Nestled in the heart of Tampines, one GP clinic offers a quick, pain-free and relatively cheap solution to patients plagued by severe pain.

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'Sonotron works by directing sound energy pitched at a certain frequency to treat a host of painful conditions. These range from typical sports injuries like tennis elbow and sprained ankle, to swollen joints brought on by arthritis, and to migraines and even ulcers.'
- Dr Gan Tek Kah

Dr Gan Tek Kah's Street 21 Clinic is one of only three clinics in Singapore so far to have invested a hefty \$80,000 in Sonotron, a patented device that uses sound energy to reduce inflammation and alleviate pain due to arthritis and sprains, among other conditions.

Hailed as an alternative to modern medicine for chronic pain, Sonotron therapy was invented by a doctor in the US in the late 1980s. It made its way here several years ago and is apparently well-received in countries such as Malaysia and Japan.

'Sonotron works by directing sound energy pitched at a certain frequency to treat a host of painful conditions. These range from typical sports injuries like tennis elbow and sprained ankle, to swollen joints brought on by arthritis, and to migraines and even ulcers,' says Dr Gan.

The veteran doctor, who has more than 20 years of clinical experience, started treating patients with Sonotron about five years ago. He now sees up to five patients each day.

Explaining the science behind the technology, he says, 'Basically, Sonotron works by getting rid of the free radicals that are present in cells. The energy from the device converts free radicals into oxygen and water. This arrests the production of hydrogen peroxide which stimulates nerves and causes pain.'

Unlike some other state-of-the-art technologies, the Sonotron device looks decisively low-tech.

'I was quite sceptical when I first saw the device - it looked nothing more than a handheld hair dryer attached to a cassette recorder!' admits Dr Gan.

He became convinced of its efficacy, however, after speaking to doctors who have tried the technology.

'As a doctor, what's important is that the patient feels relief and suffers no

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Enterprise



adverse effects. This treatment is non-invasive. It is done by aiming the device at the site of pain and doesn't even touch the skin,' explains Dr Gan.

The patient may feel a little heat, but the process itself isn't painful. But how effective is it and how long must one undergo treatment?

'Well, that depends on how long-standing the pain is. We need to know where it hurts and why it hurts. Only then can we try to manage the pain,' says Dr Gan, who charges his patients \$40 per site treatment lasting about 20 minutes each.

According to him, patients usually require between three and five sessions before the pain subsides. Simpler cases like a sprained ankle, however, may take only one session.

'The duration of treatment really varies from individual to individual. My most serious case is an elderly man who had an unsuccessful slipped disc operation. He was barely able to walk 50 metres without feeling the pain. For him, it took about 20 sessions before the problem was finally resolved,' recalls Dr Gan.

He cautioned, however, that pain management does not necessarily constitute a cure.

'I need to know the underlying cause of the pain. If it is the result of a sprain, for example, then the matter is quite straightforward. But if the pain is a result of something else, then you have to treat the source in order to effect a more permanent result,' says Dr Gan.

For instance, Sonotron therapy can treat and help heal an ulcer resulting from diabetes, but unless the diabetic condition is brought under control, the ulcers are likely to recur, he explained.

Could this be nothing more than a placebo effect?

'That's not likely, since quite a few patients report the same positive result. The pain is real, after all,' says Dr Gan, who frequently turns the device on himself at the end of a long day.

'I use it on my own tired eyes, and when I get migraines. I haven't been the worse for it,' he says.

Apart from humans, it seems the therapy works on animals, too. In initial testing conducted by the University of Wisconsin's Veterinary School, the Sonotron was shown to reduce swelling and increase the range of motion of 49 horses with induced arthritis.

Such therapy may be useful especially for the elderly, notes Dr Gan.

'Older people more often suffer from arthritic pain, and they may not wish to over rely on painkillers, since long-term use of painkillers has been demonstrated to have ill effects. Sonotron therapy therefore offers one option,' explains Dr Gan.