

GOOD HEALTH ANALYSIS

How 'acupuncture' can cure back pain

By MARION McKAY

THE insertion of needles to heal — a concept practised for centuries by the Chinese in the form of acupuncture — is now being used in a new way to relieve pain.

In an innovative technique that probes deep into muscles in spasm, experts are achieving startling results in patients with both long and short-term problems.

Intramuscular stimulation (IMS) is proving so successful that clinical trials are due to start soon at Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge.

The treatment, which uses nothing more sophisticated than sterile needles, aims to relax nerves and muscles that have gone into spasm as a result of damage due to injury, degeneration or disease.

Pioneered in this country by consultant anaesthetist Dr Rajesh Munglani, medical director of the Pain Relief Service at Addenbrookes, IMS is now routinely practised in his clinic by osteopath Robin Shepherd.

Unlike acupuncture, which taps into lines of energy flow or 'chi', IMS works on the musculoskeletal system.

Chronic pain is often caused by muscle contraction. IMS unlocks these spasms by the technique of 'needling'.

Needles are pushed deep into the affected muscle tissue. As the needle penetrates, it 'irritates' the muscle, triggering an automatic response and causing the muscle to contract still further and 'grab hold' of the needle tightly — an action which in turn stimulates nerve endings in the muscle to relax.



Needle treatment: Charlotte Thompson with son Joshua

The more the muscle is stimulated, the more it subsequently relaxes.

Because the needles are so sharp, they cause 'microtraumas', or tiny bleeds, into the muscle. These bleeds set off a mild inflammatory process — a feature of which is the release of healing chemicals including prostaglandins.

This inflammation, which may last for up to three weeks, begins to heal the muscle — with a corresponding reduction in pain — as a result of increased blood flow to the area and improved muscle elasticity.

Dr Munglani first became interested in IMS two years

ago when he met Canadian pain specialist Dr Chan Gunn, who developed the technique. It is based on the same osteopathic principles of tightening and relaxing muscles, but is able to treat muscles at a much deeper level.

Osteopath Robin Shepherd explains: 'IMS penetrates far deeper into the muscles than any other treatment — up to four inches, for example, in a buttock. When the needles are in position and grasped by the muscles, I can stimulate them still further by twisting them, tightening the muscles a little more before it relaxes.'

'Patients say the treated

area feels like toothache or a bee sting. They may be sore for a few days, but then they begin to feel the benefits.

'IMS is probably the most powerful technique for the relief of muscle spasms that is available, and is now my main form of treatment.' Used early enough, he says, it could even prevent the need for surgery.

He adds: 'IMS is extremely useful for chronic pain because nothing else really touches it. But it is enormously beneficial, too, in the treatment of frozen shoulders, tennis elbow and RSI-type injuries.'

ONE of the first patients to benefit from IMS is Surrey-based amateur jockey Charlotte Thompson, 26, whose back problems stem from a riding accident ten years ago.

The agonising back pain that followed was caused by the prolapse of two spinal discs at the bottom of her back. An operation at the age of 16 allowed her to ride again, but subsequent falls aggravated her back so much that three epidural and cortisone injections were given routinely.

She says: 'Although I know that my back will never be healed 100 per cent, IMS has improved things far better than I could have hoped for. With IMS I can go for up to four months feeling pain-free.'

The treatment is simple, cheap and cost-effective. It can be used in the later stages of pregnancy and was very effective for Charlotte when she was pregnant.

Charlotte explains: 'When I was expecting Joshua, who is almost two, my posture was misaligned but IMS soon sorted it out. I can carry him around quite easily now.'

■ **FOR more information on IMS and a list of current practitioners click on:** www.intramuscularstimulation.com