

HEALING WITH NEEDLES

Acupuncture Aids Torture Survivors

by Carrie Elizabeth Sklar

Being a survivor of torture can mean many different things: feeling scared, experiencing constant headaches, stress, lack of sleep, depression and more. To help victims of torture overcome these and other emotional and physical obstacles, *Survivors of Torture* International has added acupuncture as one step in a complex healing process.

There are approximately 10,000 people of different ages, race, gender and country of origin living in San Diego who have one thing in common: they have been tortured. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that there are 400,000 torture survivors in the United States. Amnesty International has documented 117 countries that practise torture.

Founded in 1997, *Survivors of Torture* is a nonprofit organisation that seeks to care for these survivors of politically motivated torture and their families in San Diego.

"Our goal is to help people [who have been tortured] get into the mainstream by healing their injuries, recovering their strength and rebuilding their lives," said David Gangsei, clinical director of *Survivors of Torture*. "Acupuncture is one of the treatments we have as a holistic approach to helping torture survivors."

At the end of 2001, Diane Powell, a psychiatrist working with *Survivors of Torture*, suggested acupuncture to a patient. At the recommendation of a licensed acupuncturist, Pacific College of Oriental Medicine (PCOM) was contacted about providing these services. *Survivors of Torture* has been sending patients there ever since. "Pacific College recognized a need that they wanted to respond to," Gangsei said.

PCOM President Jack Miller said he considers aiding torture survivors an important cause.

"There is, perhaps, no more heart-wrenching patient than one who has been subjected to the brutality of torture," Miller said. "If our medicine can benefit these victims of inhumanity in any way, we must try. It seems clear that acupuncture and Oriental medicine have been effective in relieving some of these patients' symptoms, and hopefully helping them regain trust in society."

When the partnership with *Survivors of Torture* and PCOM first began, the college provided 10 free acupuncture treatments to patients referred by *Survivors of Torture*.

However, that arrangement changed when *Survivors of Torture* received a grant from the Local Opportunities Fund of the California Endowment in August of 2002 and offered to pay the college for its services. The college decided to continue providing *Survivors of Torture* patients four treatments free of charge. Beyond this, the college bills *Survivors of Torture* for the treatments, with every fourth treatment free. Patients referred by *Survivors of Torture* also receive any herbs they need at a 35 percent discount, with the herbs billed to the programme rather than the individual.

Patients are referred to PCOM for acupuncture by Sarak Suon, the *Survivors of Torture* medical coordinator, in consultation with the rest of the organisation's clinical team. These referrals are part of a growing national trend; a Kaiser study conducted in 1996 found that 57.2 percent of primary care physicians in Northern California used or recommended acupuncture in the previous year.

"Patients get referred for acupuncture for a whole variety of pain complaints and general health concerns and general stress," Gangsei said.

The conditions that survivors of torture deal with are many: rape, mutilation, beatings, burns and blinding are only a few of the experiences many victims of torture are forced to endure. Even after fleeing to havens like San Diego, many survivors of torture remain stressed and fearful for their families, who may not have been able to escape.

According to licensed acupuncturist and Pacific College faculty member Todd Luger, the *Survivors of Torture* patients who seek treatment at the clinic tend to come in with variable conditions, and often indicate different types of pain at each session. This makes it difficult to treat these patients, since they rarely present with consistent ailments. Luger said that this variability is an indication of the psychological effect of torture on its victims; the source of a survivor's pain may vary depending on the emotional state of the patient.

Jodine Wamsley, a clinical intern at the college, has been treating an Ethiopian woman, referred by *Survivors of Torture*, for four months.

"She was in an Ethiopian jail for a year," Wamsley said. "She was sleeping naked on the freezing concrete, being tortured and all kinds of horrible things."

Yet in the past months, Wamsley reports that there have been definite signs of improvement.

"She was in so much pain when she first came to see me, she couldn't stand or cook in her own kitchen," Wamsley said. "Now she can move around. She is so extremely grateful for her treatment ... she gives me hugs to let me know she feels better."

Wamsley said that though it is clear that some of the patients referred by *Survivors of Torture* have "a lot of psycho-emotional issues," the main challenge as an acupuncturist is the language barrier.

"The interpreter only comes once a month, so we have to get by with her limited English, facial expressions, pointing – things like that," Wamsley said. "I would say that's the only real challenge. It's been an amazing experience for me."

Luger agreed that the inability to verbally communicate with *Survivors of Torture* patients makes them challenging patients. As a result, he and the interns at the college tend to use a "palpation-based bodywork style of acupuncture" to discover pain sources and deduce the best method of treatment.

Because the torture survivors are often unable to communicate their emotional state, Luger said that he often includes generalised acupuncture points that calm the mind with each treatment. These points include Yingtang (M-HN-3), Shenmen HE-7 and ear-Shenmen. Because torture survivors tend to be in permanent sympathetic nerve dominance, Luger also stimulates the Sympathetic ear point with acupuncture.

Though the types of pain and needs of these patients vary, Luger added that each *Survivors of Torture* patient is treated with a more aggressive needling technique than might otherwise be used, with the needles receiving stronger stimulation, deeper insertion and longer duration than Luger might apply to other patients. This proves to benefit these patients because the stronger the stimulation and the longer the duration, the more sedating the treatment is, providing a calming effect for those being treated.

According to Suon, some patients are hesitant about trying acupuncture because of the needles involved.

"Before they go, the needles are a big issue that makes them not want to try it, but after they've gone, they don't even mention [the needles]," Suon said. "The patients tell me that they love the service."

Suon added that not only do most of his patients love their acupuncture treatments, they also keep going back for more.

"We have a long continuation," Suon said. "Some of our clients go [to Pacific College for acupuncture] forever."

Other services provided by *Survivors of Torture* include working with lawyers to gain patients the right to live and work in the United States. Doctors and therapists provided by the organisation also help patients heal both physically and emotionally. Acupuncture is a helpful complement to these other therapies.

Gangsei said that acupuncture treatments have undeniable benefits for torture survivors.

"Our experience has been that the clients referred to acupuncture have benefited enormously, both in terms of their symptoms and in terms of general morale," Gangsei said.

One *Survivors of Torture* patient who has been receiving acupuncture treatments at the college agreed.

"Since I have been coming to the clinic, my appetite has returned," the patient said. "I am now able to sleep in my own bed, when before I was not due to back pain. And the pain in my legs is almost gone. Pacific College is a nice place, and for my health it is a great place to be."

Suon agreed, saying "Our goal is to help [survivors of torture] relieve the pain that they have - either the psychological or the physical. So it's important that we provide [acupuncture] to them so they'll feel better and be able to function in their daily lives."

Overcoming the pain and emotional stigma of torture may take a lifetime. Doctors, lawyers and therapists may work with patients for years, and results are never guaranteed. Hopefully, with the added aid of acupuncture, survivors of torture will overcome the horrors of their past. For more information please contact *Survivors of Torture* International: Survivors@notorture.org or Pacific College of Oriental Medicine: media@pacificcollege.edu

Carrie Sklar promotes the health benefits of Oriental Medicine for Pacific College of Oriental Medicine.

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