

For Migraines, He's Mr. Miracle

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Like the healing waters of Lourdes, the Ontario Migraine Clinic attracts those who need a miracle. Every week, they come here to the tiny hamlet of Georgetown, hoping that after years of failed treatments, which may have included everything from hypnosis to neurosurgery, acupuncturist Brendan Cleary can exorcise the headaches that have established evil dominion within their skulls. Some of them have come from across Ontario, others from around the world—among Mr. Cleary's patients are people from Europe, China and a woman who made the pilgrimage from Afghanistan.

"If you ever had a headache like this you'd understand," says migraine sufferer Casey Campbell, who has spent the past three months staying at a local motel so she could see Mr. Cleary three days a week. "You'd do anything."

The waiting room, which is filled to capacity with several dozen people, is designed for the unique needs of patients like Ms. Campbell: The blinds are drawn, the decor is muted, and the air is filled with music so soft and soothing that elevator tunes seem like a Metallica concert by comparison.

Mr. Cleary, meanwhile, consults patient files and prepares the tools of his trade—sterilized steel needles so fine they look like chromed human hairs. His specialty is a rarefied brand of acupuncture taught by a now-deceased Sri Lankan medical guru, but Mr. Cleary defies the eastern mystic stereotype that you might expect—he's a clean-cut marathon runner with a pair of BMWs, a house in Oakville and a carbon-fibre racing bike just like Lance Armstrong's.

His business, which has become something of a legend among migraine sufferers searching for a cure, is based on pure supply and demand: There are a lot of people with migraines, and they will pay handsomely to make them stop.

"These people are desperate," says Mr. Cleary.

"If you told some of them that you needed to cut off their fingers to stop the headaches, they'd stick out their hand."

Today offers a typical cross-section of patients—some are here for maintenance sessions, others are new arrivals in desperate need of relief. One of them is a middle-aged woman whose face bears the kind of expression you might expect on someone who has just been scalped at the Little Bighorn. Next to her is a grey-haired man whose hands are clamped over his eyes. Then there's Linda Pabst, deputy mayor of a nearby township, who has the serene, thankful look of someone who has been delivered to a sun-dappled meadow after a lengthy tour of hell. And why not? At 62, Ms. Pabst is enjoying her first-ever relief from the migraines that began plaguing her when she was just 16.

Ms. Pabst's were not your average headaches. She recalls them with a pain connoisseur's sense of detail. Some made her feel as though a miniature road crew was trying to jackhammer their way out of her skull. Others had a sharp, piercing quality, as if a frozen spike were being driven into her forehead. Some started out as a leaden feeling that slowly mushroomed into massive pain that made her imagine a boulder being detonated inside her cranium.

To combat the pain, she lay in a silent, darkened room and used an arsenal of painkillers. Aspirins had no effect. Tylenol 3 worked only some of the time. In some cases, she ended up in the hospital for the only sure-fire cure: a shot of Demerol.

She began seeing Mr. Cleary about two years ago after her doctor referred her as a last resort. After a few weeks of treatment, the headaches began to diminish. Now they're gone, and she comes in only for sporadic visits that Mr. Cleary calls "lube, oil and filter" sessions to ensure that the migraines don't return.

Today follows a standard routine: Mr. Cleary takes her pulse, delicately running his fingers along her wrist again and again, like Jimi Hendrix working the neck of a Stratocaster during a rendition of Purple Haze. Then he places half a dozen needles in the back of her hand, between her thumb and forefinger. Several more are placed in the top of her skull. Then Ms. Pabst is left to sit in a chair for about half an hour while she does breathing exercises.

Ms. Pabst has no idea why the treatment is so effective.

“This works for me,” she says. Nothing else did. That’s the bottom line.”

Since opening his office in 1997, Mr. Cleary has seen thousands of patients. His costs are minimal, and business is good: He charges \$75 per session, and most patients require 40 to 50 visits. (Some need far less, and some far more—one patient spent over \$15,000 before his migraines finally went away.) His fees are not covered by OHIP.

“I have a motivated client base,” says Mr. Cleary.

Raised in small town Ontario, he studied science at McMaster and competed in track and field. As an athlete, he visited acupuncturists for drug-free relief from sports injuries, and soon became intrigued with the technique. After graduation, he went to Sri Lanka, where he spent five years studying with Anton Jayasuriya, an acupuncturist and alternative-medicine guru.

His years with Mr. Jayasuriya taught Mr. Cleary the critical element of his technique—a highly detailed analysis of a patient’s pulse to determine the state of their health and what needs to be addressed in order to treat the migraine. Some acupuncturists use three criteria when evaluating the pulse. Mr. Jayasuriya used 34. From there, Mr. Jayasuriya moved on to the placement of the acupuncture needles, using a chart that identifies 3,700 different points in the body.

Mr. Jayasuriya’s brand of acupuncture, it turns out, works particularly well on headaches, and Mr. Cleary found himself with a ready market for his skills when he returned to Canada.

It’s estimated that about 18 per cent of the North American population suffers from migraines at least once a year, and acupuncture enjoys growing acceptance as a treatment for the condition. A 2005 poll of American doctors, for example, showed that about 60 per cent believe acupuncture is at least somewhat effective in treating some conditions, including headaches. A 2004 study published on the website of the British Medical Journal found that acupuncture helped patients who suffered from severe headaches.

“Many patients have success with non-traditional treatments,” says Corry Thomas, program manager for family and community health at Toronto Western Hospital. “It’s becoming a much more common response to some medical conditions. There are certain conditions that respond to it extremely well.”

Mr. Cleary believes strongly in conventional medicine, but says acupuncture is more effective at treating certain conditions, including migraines.

“What the needles do is make you neurologically fit, so you can beat the migraine,” he says. Many of his patients have become converts.

“He made me into a different person,” says Ms. Campbell, 36. Until recently, Ms. Campbell was working at a record company in London, but found herself crippled by migraines. Like many sufferers, her migraines started in her mid teens. At first she could control them by shutting the blinds and eliminating noise. But they got worse and worse. Before long, almost any stimulus could produce a killer migraine—temperature changes, barometric pressure changes, wine, caffeine, humidity, touch, sounds, smells, too little sleep, or too much sleep. Once she was in the grips of a migraine, she couldn’t stand anyone touching her.

“The sheets felt like sandpaper,” she says. “I couldn’t stand it. All you want is to get outside your head.”

Ms. Campbell tried treatment after treatment. She saw general practitioners, neurologists, physiotherapists, kinesiologists and hypnotists. She had X-rays, MRIs, cranio-sacral therapy, other types of acupuncture and Reiki energy massages. She joined migraine-sufferer groups, looking for support from others, but hated the atmosphere.

“I didn’t want to be in a victims’ group,” she says. “It defines who you are. The headaches had taken up enough of my life already.”

About a year and a half ago, the migraines intensified. Her doctor prescribed painkillers and antidepressants. Even so, she entertained thoughts of suicide.

“It wasn’t much of a life,” she says. “I wasn’t myself any more.”

She flew back to Canada to be closer to her parents, who live in Cobourg, Ont. Concerned at her deterioration, her parents began hunting for a cure. After weeks of phone calls, and trolling through Internet support groups for migraine sufferers, they came up with two options. One was a U.S. clinic that treats migraines with an unorthodox surgical technique, removing a small muscle located behind the nose. The other was Mr. Cleary’s clinic.

“There’s nothing to lose,” her parents told her.

Ms. Campbell went with Mr. Cleary. Since February, she’s seen him up to 12 times a week. Today, she sits in a chair for the first of three sessions. Her head and hands bristle with needles, but she’s smiling.

“I don’t have a headache,” she says. “How great is that?”