

BEGINNING TO SEE THE LIGHT

Jim McBeth discovers laser therapy – and 45 minutes later his cares have washed away

It began somewhere in the elbow of my left arm: a soothing feeling, imperceptible at first, but definitely burgeoning. It was soon accompanied by a slackening of the muscles leading towards the neck.

Relaxation? The world was blue, courtesy of a pair of tinted wraparound goggles. A pin-point of light, emanating from a long laser pen, focused on an area between my wrist and forearm. Stretched out on a leather recliner, in an airy room within a Glasgow terrace overlooking Queen's Park, the feeling was assuredly growing.

It was complemented by a soothing background wave of Buddhist chant and Ann Penman's soft, rural, Northern Irish accent. Definitely relaxed. There is a terrible, wilful urge to dismiss alternative therapies as the triumph of wishful thinking over reality.

When one experiences a pleasant physical change in the body, however, it is apparent that, whatever the reason for it, one cannot escape the beneficial effect.

Like it or not, I was deeply relaxed. In the space of 45 minutes, the cold laser light was applied to 20 different areas of my head, neck and arms. By the end of the session, I was as relaxed as a bowl of boiled spaghetti, a state achieved by a combination of the technology of today allied to an art as ancient as time.

Penman, a therapist who has set up the first laser treatment programme for stress in Scotland, says: "We don't heal what we can't heal. If there appears to be a clearly-defined major problem, we refer to the appropriate specialist. But for the growing stress problems in this era of pressure, we can help a lot. Where we can help is to reduce the stress levels associated with hectic lifestyles to prevent a later, more serious, problem emerging."

"Many men – and women – in the workplace are afraid to admit they are feeling stressed or unwell, in case it is perceived as a sign of weakness."

The stress therapy was born out of a successful smoking cessation programme pioneered in Scotland by

Penman. It has enjoyed a success rate of more than 50 per cent, which is a phenomenal record.

"I became aware that people were returning even after they had stopped smoking to get additional treatment for the stresses associated with giving up," says Penman.

Laser therapy is 21st-century acupuncture without the invasive element. A low-level laser light is applied to the area where needles would normally be inserted. The light stimulates the release of endorphins, a chemical produced naturally in the body to promote a state of relaxation and well-being.

Apparently, exercise, sex and eating chocolate can also increase endorphin levels in the body. "I'm afraid I cannot offer any of those additional services, but my method is infinitely more calm and there is less potential for weight gain," says Penman. "Some people do not like the ideas of needles and many people don't like to disrobe, which is required for something like massage. That is not to say that good results cannot be achieved by these therapies, but it is a question of personal preference."

There is no doubt that an hour in Penman's upholstered recliner is infinitely preferable to being pummelled by a Swedish woman called Ingeborg. Penman's skill deduced that stress was not a big problem in my life, but I was tired and tense.

"You aren't stressed, but you've been working hard; there's a tightness in the shoulders and neck. We can get rid of that and the rest follows," she says.

Personally, a stress-free life is something which I would like to aim for. I am in the middle of a drug-aided programme to

stop smoking (more of that at a later date) and a calm demeanour would be a definite boon. Penman is confident that modern laser treatment has a major future as an alternative therapy.

"The resistance once experienced from the medical profession is a thing of the past," she says. "Modern doctors understand and appreciate that a holistic approach is valid and valuable. The only problem is that quacks often make promises they cannot keep."

Penman has been working with doctors at Monklands hospital, in Lanarkshire, on a control group of patients who want to give up smoking. The trials indicate that 55 per cent are still not smoking after six months, which is high by any standard.

"It's a very simplistic approach, soothing, relaxed and calm," says Penman. "I have one man who is prepared to fly over from Belgium for treatment. Although we have just started, we are seeing a wide cross-section of the community, from home-makers to teachers to business people."

Penman has also started a corporate arm of the programme, where she goes into the workplace and treats individuals. She says: "Enlightened employers realise that people are a valuable asset to the company. If they are kept well and happy, they literally produce the goods."

One of the major plus points of laser therapy, according to Penman, is that it has no contraindications. "It can be used by people on medication and those suffering from cardiac or diabetic problems. All they have to do is sit back and relax."