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Health

Journey away from pain: Fibromyalgia is mystery to mainstream medicine

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

By Katy Buchanan, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The pain began in Christine Mancano's right leg and, despite her best efforts and the best and worst efforts of her doctors, it never really stopped.

More than 20 years later, the Follansbee, W.Va., woman has finally found a measure of relief from the pain, which was eventually diagnosed as fibromyalgia. But in between, she endured spinal surgery, cortisone shots and years of anti-depressant and pain relief medications that provided fleeting relief at best and, at worst, actually intensified and spread the pain.

"I wasn't getting any better or any worse," said Ms. Mancano, 55, who has found that acupuncture helps her.

Her experience is not uncommon for sufferers of fibromyalgia, a chronic pain syndrome that doctors have a hard time even diagnosing, much less treating effectively. The cause and very nature of the disorder is still poorly understood.

Fibromyalgia is characterized by widespread musculoskeletal aches, pain and stiffness and is associated with stress, fatigue and poor sleep. The pain is most common in the neck, back, shoulders, pelvic girdle and hands. Most sufferers are women.

But because the symptoms of fibromyalgia can be associated with any number of other conditions, it is difficult to diagnose and to study. Many patients end up like Ms. Mancano, spending years getting a diagnosis, taking a variety of medications in the hope that maybe the next one that comes along will be the one to make it all better.

So far, no such drug exists, though a variety of new medical treatments are under



Lake Fong, Post-Gazette
Christine Mancano found relief from fibromyalgia through acupuncture, after years of taking prescription medications and cortisone shots.
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Though she is not his patient, Christine Mancano, over the years came to understand Dr. Chetlin's point of view. She had begun to wonder what long-term effect the drugs she was taking would have on her body. And she wondered why she was taking drugs that didn't help.

She did some research into other treatments, reading about vitamins, acupuncture and massage. Her family doctor directed her to the AGH Integrated Medicine Program, where she began having acupuncture six years ago.

"I won't say its a cure-all," she said, "but its a lot better" than when she was taking the prescription pain and anti-depressant medications.

And since she started the treatments, the pain has gotten better. Now, she goes only when she has the occasional flare-up.

It's hard to say whether it's the acupuncture, the take-charge mindset, or a combination of both that's helped. But in the view of her acupuncturist, Jennifer Whiteside, patients who take an active role in their healing often report the most improvement.

"A lot of people in our current medical system depend on people to take care of them," she said. "I think that the individual, if they have the mindset they're going to get over this problem, I think it's possible for them."

Ms. Mancano now knows that a life-long inability to sleep deeply contributed to her fibromyalgia, perhaps less so than the stress often associated with it.

But in her journey to learning to live with it, she discovered the value of keeping an open mind about treatments.

"I think more people need to do that, take a chance and be willing to try new things."

(Katy Buchanan can be reached at kbuchanan@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1523.)

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