

MIGRAINES:

mission to stop the misery

BY NATANYA MULHOLLAND



PICTURE: JULIAN GODSWAN/STYLING: BERTINA LOUW

After years of skepticism a Johannesburg surgeon is getting the nod from the international medical community regarding his findings showing migraines can be cured without medication.

It seems the doc was right all along . . .

IT'S a pain that torments so many people – the migraine. It debilitates sufferers, and ruins their lives. And no one understands this better than Dr Elliot Shevel, the medical director at The Headache Clinic in Johannesburg.

But there is hope. Dr Shevel is a surgeon who specialises in the face and jaw and enthusiastically explains his cutting-edge migraine treatment which is receiving growing international recognition as the most effective way to relieve chronic migraine pain.

Brimming with passion for what he calls his "life's work", he explains: "We're on the verge of a whole new era of understanding what causes the migraine, thanks to a recent study by a Dutch neurologist. He proves what I've been saying for the past 15 years: the pain of migraine doesn't come from inside the brain, but rather from structures outside the brain – like muscles, superficial scalp arteries and nerve systems."

This new study, published in the British neurological journal *Brain* was led by Dr GG Schoonman of the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. He used a hi-tech scanner, called a 3T magnetic resonance angiogram, to measure arteries in the brain. His conclusion? Contrary to the long-standing belief, there is no widening of the arteries, known as vasodilation, inside the brain

during a migraine. Just what Dr Shevel has been saying all these years . . .

This conclusion has rocked migraine research to its core. Because for the past 60 years migraine patients have been treated with drugs such as ergots and triptans, which are drugs specifically designed to constrict blood vessels and thereby reverse the assumed abnormal dilation of arteries inside the brain.

"No wonder the drugs have such poor results," says Dr Shevel. "For over half a century and without any proof the medical and scientific communities have clung blindly to the erroneous belief that there is widening of the arteries in the brain during migraine. Millions of sufferers could benefit if outdated science is finally discarded."

"Schoonman's study, which proves I'm on track, has sent shock waves through the old guard of headache specialists. Many find it difficult to abandon their established ways, either because they're funded by the pharmaceutical giants or they can't handle their life's work being proved wrong," Dr Shevel explains.

HOLDING a plastic skull marked with red lines that depict the various cranial arteries, Dr Shevel talks of his growing understanding of migraine pain. He has been treat-

MORE THAN A HEADACHE?

Do you get headaches more than three times a week?

Do headaches affect your day-to-day life?

Are your headaches so bad that you take pain-killers every day and at a higher dose than is recommended?

Do your headaches cause you to be short of breath, dizzy, drowsy or confused?

If you answered yes to some or all of these questions, you could be a migraine sufferer. Speak to your doctor for information.

ing migraines for 15 years and is the only surgeon in the world to relieve migraine pain by tying off certain arteries outside the brain.

By shifting his gaze to the structures outside the brain he's found that the headaches are caused primarily by arterial pain, muscle tension or – in most cases – a combination of both. As a result he and his team at The Headache Clinic have devised novel migraine treatment options that don't rely on drugs.

These include the handy Posture Modifying Appliance, designed by Dr Shevel and patented in South Africa and the USA in the early 1990s.

Basically, it's a custom-made palate that corrects the positioning of the jaw to ease muscle strain in the face, neck and head, and particularly to relieve tension on the jaw and neck muscles.

But Dr Shevel's most ground-breaking treatment is arterial surgery, which he stumbled upon in 1995 when a patient who was scheduled for mouth surgery complained of a severe headache.

"I noticed a blood vessel pulsing on the side of her head. When I pressed it the pain disappeared. When I lifted my finger, it returned. I had no doubt these arteries were causing the pain and it wouldn't be too risky to tie them off." He performed the procedure and his patient's migraines disappeared. >

'We're on the verge of a whole new era of understanding of what causes the migraine'

To date Dr Shevel has used arterial surgery to treat over 500 chronic migraine sufferers. His estimated success rate is 85 per cent. Headache specialists around the world are showing a growing interest in his technique and following recommendations of expat doctors and former patients, migraine sufferers from around the world are coming to South Africa in search of this operation – an in-theatre procedure that takes 30 to 90 minutes and costs between R3 000 and R30 000 depending on the number of blood vessels to be tied off (usually between one and eight).

And Dr Shevel's not finished yet. In fact, his latest research involves cryosurgery: a probe is used to freeze – rather than cut or tie off – the arteries responsible for the migraines. This advancement could make the already minimally invasive procedure almost bloodless.

Clearly this surgeon's pioneering process is on the rise. In July 2007 a report on his breakthrough surgery was published in the international

journal *Therapy*. It was accompanied by a study showing that 55 patients reported an approximately two-and-a-half times improvement in their quality of life a year after the operation. The small number of patients who continued to experience migraines reported fewer, less severe migraines.

Dr Shevel and Harvard University's Professor Giel Spierings have co-authored a report, published in the American journal *Cranio*, showing that extra-cranial arteries which have no connection with the brain are involved in migraine pain. And, in his quest to map the migraine code, Dr Shevel has teamed up with Italian migraine expert, Professor Carlo Cianchetti of the University of Cagliari. They hope to complete their research and publish results later this year.

Each new study takes modern migraine wisdom another step away from outdated principles and practices – and hopefully a step closer to relief for migraineurs.

But the search for new answers has not been called off. Debate between

migraine practitioners and between sufferers continues.

"The option to have a safe and effective procedure at a day clinic will change people's lives," Dr Shevel says. "This is one of the first viable, tested options to daily medication. For many patients medication is largely ineffective and even exacerbates the problem in the form of the Rebound Headache Condition – where the drugs actually bring on migraine pain. The surgery provides a safe and permanent solution for millions of sufferers."

He is passing on his skills to interested surgeons in Italy. In October he will be stating his case for arterial surgery before the big guns of the headache world at an international headache conference in Prague.

He may be 66 but Dr Shevel laughs when people ask him when he's going to retire.

"I feel like I'm just getting going," he says, smiling. "It's my mission to bring the truth to the public. The drug companies may not like it but people need to know there is a way to stop the pain."



The monster in my head

If you've ever had a migraine, you'll know it's not just a headache. It's a debilitating condition, which, depending on its frequency and severity, can not only ruin your day but also your life

IN PAIN.
"If this treatment can relieve my migraines even by a third, then I will get a third of my life back," says artist Marlise Keith.

MARLISE Keith, a 36-year-old artist, is sitting in her studio in Kalk Bay, a serene seaside hamlet just outside Cape Town. From the stoep of the cottage there are views of the sea to the left and the mountain decked with fynbos to the right. Inside, the cosy home is full of interesting books, found objects and artworks complete or in progress. It's comfy. The picture of peace.

But behind this pretty picture and beneath the artist's wide smile, there is an internal world that is often the opposite of peace. Marlise is a chronic migraine sufferer.

"Sometimes I'm lucky," she says. "I'll wake up with >



AN IMAGE. "My-grain", oil on wood, by Marlise Keith.

a whisper in the back of my head – the brain stem where ancient knowledge is buried – and I know I’m going to get a migraine. It’s deeper than a headache. Then the panic starts: when should I take the medicine?”

The timing is stressful for Marlise because it’s so important. If she takes her medicine too soon, it might not work and she’ll have to take it again. “It’s a mess,” she says. “If the meds don’t remove the migraine, they sometimes bring on a headache because I’ll have taken the painkillers too often.” Either way, the result is hours of unavoidable pain.

“On other occasions a migraine comes on in seconds,” Marlise says. “I could be sending an e-mail and when I look up to answer the phone, there it is. Then it’s ruthless: there’s no warning or time to take the meds, so you crash and burn. My dad, who also has

chronic migraines and from whom I inherited the condition – calls them ‘steam-train migraines’ because they pull in like a locomotive.”

You only start to realise just how agonising it is when she continues: “When I can’t get any relief and I can’t vomit – which usually lessens the pain – I get into a cycle where I beg anyone who’s there to stop the pain. When that doesn’t work I get particularly angry and start to cry. Then I’ll hit my head with my hands or bang it against the wall because any other pain is a relief. It seldom gets that bad, but when it does I get angry: the migraines don’t kill me, the pain and the pattern are unrelenting, and I know in the near future they’ll return.

“I don’t drink alcohol. I don’t smoke. I’ve never used recreational drugs,” she says, looking out to sea from her seat on the stoep. “I don’t eat cheese, mushrooms, bacon or eggs. Citrus and spicy foods

THEY’VE SUFFERED TOO

Vincent van Gogh
Virginia Woolf
Lewis Carroll
Julius Caesar
Napoleon
Sigmund Freud
Elvis Presley
Princess Margaret
Elizabeth Taylor
Lisa Kudrow
Elle Macpherson
Serena Williams
Stephen King
Carly Simon
Whoopi Goldberg

SOURCE: WWW.MIGRAINES.ORG

don’t feature much either. Most food triggers have already been eliminated from my diet.”

But, despite her efforts, Marlise’s migraines – which have plagued her since she was five – have worsened over the past two years. It’s reached the stage where she’s unable to take on full-time employment. When a migraine strikes, she’s overcome with sensitivity to every stimulus – light, sound, touch and even smell. All she can do is retreat to her bedroom, close the curtains and endure the onslaught until it subsides, which can be anything from two hours to three days.

All her searching has yielded little relief and so Marlise is becoming progressively cynical.

“I get frustrated by the advice from doctors. I do everything I’m supposed to do and still get migraines. If another doctor tells me to stop eating chocolate

I might just strangle him. I’ve really tried everything: diet, acupuncture, reiki, massage, magnet therapy, meridian therapy, homeopathy, hypno-therapy, psychology . . .

“Now I’m on epilepsy medicine. Although I’m suffering from side-effects such as anxiety, nightmares, tingling and burning sensations and night tremors, my migraines are less frequent.”

Marlise has strict rules for herself. “The only things that seem to help are: I must not miss meals, I must not dehydrate and I must not sleep too little. I cannot miss yoga – it’s essential to stretch and oxygenate my muscles – and I have to keep my medication on me wherever I go.”

Clearly she’s doing her best to battle the monster in her head. But somehow she

still can’t escape its clutches completely.

“The worst thing is I don’t have specific triggers, so I’m at its mercy. It has robbed me of my balance, speech, time, social interaction and a normal life . . . even the most basic things like where I’d like to go and what I’d like to eat and drink.

“It’s part of me so I don’t know how to live any other way – and probably wouldn’t know even if I was cured. But I still wish I could escape this. I’d relish all the extra time, that’s for sure.”

• Marlise is a rising local artist. Her work is currently being exhibited in South Africa, America, Australia, Britain, Germany, Sweden and France (where she recently spent three months as part of her prize as winner of the prestigious South African Vuleka award for 2006).

MERCY FOR THE MIGRAINEUR

Marlise Keith’s story is a shocking reminder of the plight of migraine sufferers.

According to medical journals those plagued by migraine are considered to endure a lower quality of life than those with arthritis and diabetes. They are also thought to suffer a level of dysfunction that’s comparable

to patients with myocardial infarction or congestive heart failure.

Commenting on Marlise’s so-called “steam-train headaches” pain specialist Dr Elliot Shevel explains: “She may well have a combination of cluster headaches with her migraines, commonly known as cluster

migraines. The cluster qualities are the extremely sudden onset and level of the pain, which makes her bang her head. A cluster headache is known as one of the purest forms of pain that a human being can experience.

It’s described as more painful than accidental amputation or

childbirth by those who have experienced both.

“The realisation of the severity of the migraine condition is a shock to most non-sufferers,” says Dr Shevel.

“Not only are migraine sufferers often misdiagnosed, but they’re also frequently misunderstood by spouses,

children, parents, friends and colleagues.”

And to make matters worse, it seems migraine sufferers have been misunderstood by the medical profession too.

Until now, that is. That’s why Marlise has made an appointment to see Dr Shevel. We’ll keep you posted. . .

HOW TO COPE WITH HEADACHES

DO:

- Eat balanced meals three times a day with healthy snacks in between to make sure your body gets the nutrients and energy it needs.
- Put an ice pack on your forehead to help narrow swollen arteries and relieve tension headaches.
- Avoid bright flashing lights. A television or computer screen can also contribute to a headache.
- Breathe deeply – this promotes relaxation, relieves tension and provides more oxygen to the blood vessels.
- Massage your neck and shoulders or have it done by a therapist.
- Stretch for at least five minutes a day to loosen stiff muscles. Stretch your neck and jaw muscles carefully and gently.
- Keep a headache diary: take note of when the headache started, how long it lasted and what you consumed that could have triggered it.
- Exercise regularly to relieve tension and stimulate circulation.

DON’T:

- Skip meals. Keep your blood sugar levels stable by eating regularly and at least three times a day.
- Take too many painkillers. Your body becomes accustomed to them and they can make headaches worse in the long run.
- Lose out on sleep. Fatigue is a major cause of headaches, so aim to sleep seven or eight hours a night.
- Sleep on your stomach or in any position that causes muscle spasms in your neck.
- Eat any foods or drinks that have been identified as triggers (eg coffee, chocolate or alcohol). But remember, only about 20 per cent of sufferers have identifiable migraine triggers.

FOR MORE INFO

www.health24.com

www.mymigraine.co.za

www.headacheclinic.co.za

The South African Headache Society
0861-678-911

Migraine by Oliver Sacks
(Vintage Books)

Managing Migraines by Claire Houlding
(Authorhouse)

DR ELLIOT SHEVEL SAYS . . .

DON’T PLAY THE NAMING GAME Whether you call it a migraine or a headache, find out which structures are causing the pain. Start self-diagnosing by getting your hands onto your head. Feel every inch of your head: rub, compress, massage. Learn! Learn to self-massage or teach your partner, spouse, friend, parent or child. Massage should be firm but never painful.

FIND THE RIGHT SPECIALIST If your doctor doesn’t display a complete understanding of the anatomy of the muscles, nerves and arteries of your head, face and neck and if he doesn’t examine those structures with his hands, then you’re wasting your time.

BEWARE OF MEDICATION OVERUSE HEADACHE (MOH) According to the International Headache Society, if you’re taking headache medicine more than twice a week you’re at risk of developing MOHs or rebound headaches. This means the drugs cause more severe and more frequent headaches or migraines. It’s a downward spiral into constant medicine use and constant pain. ☹

‘MOMMY, MY HEAD HURTS’

Migraines in children can be particularly dangerous. In fact, children who get migraines have a higher chance of suffering permanent psychological damage

as a result of their migraines than those who don’t.

The tricky thing is kids are often doubted by their parents and peers and many are accused of malingering.

“But the psychological consequences of this are severe and long-lasting, for a child will believe anything the parent tells them,” pain specialist Dr Elliot Shevel says. “So if the parents don’t take the child seriously and directly or indirectly say the child is fabricating the pain, the child is likely to believe the parents and blame himself for the persistent pain.”

The solution? If your child complains of headaches, take notice. “It’s hard for parents to diagnose,” Dr Shevel says. “But if there’s vomiting or the child complains of headaches frequently and for long periods or of visual disturbances, don’t ignore them. Don’t take a chance. It may well be a migraine and if so, the best thing to do is look for the root cause. The longer you wait the more complex the problem becomes as the muscles, nerves and arteries start to develop repetitive stress injuries leading to permanent damage. This could require more invasive treatment to cure.”

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