Dedicated to ending suffering

CLARISSA TAN finds out how the Asian Pain Centre goes about assessing, managing and treating physical pain

OUCH. Your back is hurting. You noticed it weeks ago, but now it's getting worse. The feeling ranges from mild to simply excruciating – or, as Singaporeans would say, "very pain".

But pain is not there only to hurt you. Increasingly, it is regarded as the fifth vital sign – the others being blood pressure, heart rate, temperature and respiratory patterns – indicating the state of your health, said Dr Charles Siow of the Asian Pain Centre. The centre specialises in providing the latest evidence-based approaches to assessing, managing and treating physical pain.

"Pain is the body's way of saying something is wrong," said Dr Siow, who is a consultant neurologist and well as headache and pain specialist. "It is one of the critical vital signs, and most hospitals have started looking at it as the fifth vital sign."

Medically, there are two basic kinds of pain: acute pain, which results from a specific injury or trauma; and chronic pain, which is recurrent and lasting, and may take a longer time to reverse. Chronic pain, suffered by over 10 per cent of Singaporeans, includes such common complaints as back pain, neck pain, neuropathic pain or pain of the nerves, headaches and arthritis. The majority of patients who undergo pain management suffer from chronic pain.

"Pain management is an emerging branch of medicine," said Dr Yeo Siew Eam, an interventional pain specialist at the Asian Pain Centre. "Doctors who specialise in it have to undergo intensive training in understanding and treating pain as a condition."

Dr Yeo was the first in Singapore to obtain accreditation in the pain management specialty, awarded by the Australian and New Zealand Faculty of Pain Medicine. He is also the first Fellow of Interventional Pain Practice (USA) in Singapore, as well as president of the Pain Association of Singapore.

His colleague Dr Siow has completed a fellowship in headache management at the renowned Jefferson Headache Center in Philadelphia. He is also board-certified in both neurology and pain medicine by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, and in pain medicine by the American Board of Pain Medicine.

"Chronic pain is something that can greatly reduce the quality of life for a person, causing insomnia, depression, the loss of relationships and loss of work," said Dr Yeo.

The Asian Pain Centre, situated on the eighth floor of Novena Medical Centre, is the first clinic in Singapore to offer an "integrative" approach to pain management, said Dr Yeo. This means it combines contemporary Western medicine such as modern drugs, physiotherapy and psychology, with alternative complementary approaches, such as traditional Chinese treatments like acupuncture and cupping.

It also takes a multi-modality approach towards treating patients, recognising that pain very often has an emotional and psychological component, as well as a physical one, said Dr Yeo.

"Pain is often more complicated than meets the eye," said Dr Yeo. "It is subjective, and not just about administering one treatment or one drug. It also depends on what a patient needs at a particular point in time."

While the two doctors' practices often overlap, Dr Siow specialises in neurology while Dr Yeo is an anaesthesiologist. Dr Siow also carries out the "medical management", prescribing medication for patients that ranges from aspirin and Panadol on the milder side of the spectrum, to opiates at the stronger end. Dr Yeo deals with interventional procedures such as injections, nerve blocks and radio frequency lesioning.

The Asian Pain Centre also has on board a qualified acupuncturist, Ong Hong Meng, and an experienced pain therapist with a background in physical therapy, Koh Kai Ling. In addition, it has trained nursing staff and affiliated nutritionists and psychologists.

Together, they work to treat a whole range of pain conditions, both common and uncommon – headaches, facial palsy, neck pain, tennis elbow, knee pain, back pain, cancer pain, post-surgery pain, rheumatoid arthritis, sciatica, epilepsy, sleep disorders, dementia, stroke, and weight control management.

The aim is not only to keep pain at a tolerable level, but also to increase the patient's independence, reduce the restrictions on his daily life, improve his sense of control over pain and to decrease or eliminate his reliance on narcotics and sedatives.

Dr Siow recalled the case of a young woman who was suffering such severe daily headaches that she had to drop out of college. The woman had become so reliant on painkillers that they were no longer having an effect; worse, the painkillers were actually starting to contribute to her pain.

"We had to treat her intravenously and work out a way to break her out of her reliance on painkillers, which had become a source of her pain," said Dr Siow. "Firstly, our aim was to reduce her daily pain to episodic pain. We stopped the painkillers, putting her on headache preventative medicine."

The use of modulating drugs, rather than painkillers, gradually helped reduce the patient's agony. Over time, both her health and quality of life improved greatly, he said.

In another case, a patient continued to suffer chronic pain in her right hip, even after undergoing hip resurfacing surgery. The pain was due mainly to inflammation of the muscles and nerves, as well as a weight problem.

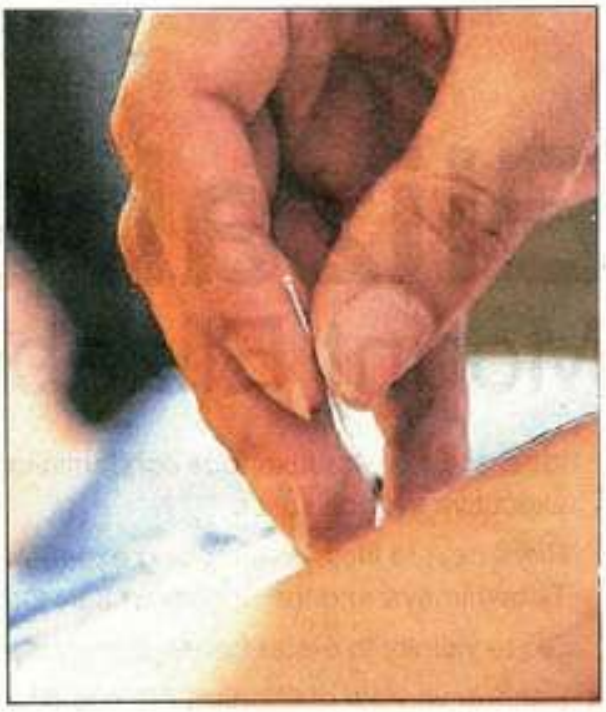
Radio frequency, image intensifier injections and other methods managed to reduce her pain by about 40 per cent, but Dr Yeo further advised her to reduce weight. He suggested physiotherapy and acupuncture as complementary approaches, to ensure that she was performing the exercises in the right way with the right method.

Acupuncture was first administered to relax the patient's muscles as well as relieve the pain via the various acu-points of the body. Then physiotherapy was employed to guide her on appropriate forms of exercise to strengthen her muscles without aggravating the injured area.

The patient reported an alleviation of her pain of up to 80 per cent.

"I have learnt how to manage my pain better and am now more conscious of my posture," she said. "This has greatly improved my work performance. I am more cheerful and my boss is happy for me."

Pain removal team: *(from left) Dr Yeo, Dr Siow, clinic manager Juliet Lee, Ms Koh and Mr Ong work together to provide patients relief through appropriate treatment*



Integrative approach: *The centre combines contemporary Western medicine with alternative medicine such as traditional Chinese treatments like acupuncture*