

Dotty Over Cup Therapy

by Leanne Edmestone, Courier Mail 9 September 2004

The ancient Chinese traditional medicinal practice of cupping is the latest health craze pursued by celebrities, writes Leanne Edmestone

Polka dots are back in fashion and not just decorating our clothes and accessories.

Thanks to celebrities such as actress Gwyneth Paltrow and Aussie Olympic swimmers Grant Hackett, Ashley Callus and Brett Hawke, the traditional Chinese therapy of cupping and its trademark red, round bruises on the skin has become the latest health craze.

Cupping is an ancient Chinese traditional medicinal practice which involves using a flame to create a vacuum in a glass cup and then placing it on the skin. The skin and top muscle layer is drawn into and held by the cup.

It is believed cupping promotes the flow of qi (pronounced chee), or energy, through the body, and opens up muscle fibres to encourage blood flow.

Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association chief executive officer Judy James says there has been a huge boost in inquiries since new mum Paltrow flashed her red-spotted back in a revealing dress, and the Aussies sportsmen showed their form during training in Athens.

"There's been quite substantial interest. People initially thought this looks a bit strange, it's all a bit weird, but cupping has been a part of a number of different cultures, including the Greek, for a long time," James says.

James says cupping is part of the acupuncture field and all qualified acupuncturists would have learnt the technique as part of their basic training.

She says cupping is used for musculo-skeletal conditions, some colds and chest congestion, and sport injuries such as torn muscles and deep bruising.

"But it has to be where appropriate, it's not a matter of throwing the cups on anywhere and hoping it works," James says.

She says so-called alternative therapies such as traditional Chinese medicine and practices such as acupuncture and cupping are no longer a last resort for desperate patients.

"Twenty to 30 years ago people went to acupuncturists as a last resort and if you didn't cure them first time, you were a quack," James laughs.

"These days seeing an acupuncturist is one of the first steps of health care."

Manly Acupuncture and Natural Therapy practitioner Leanne Zaver says inquiries and discussion about the therapy have certainly been boosted by the high-profile devotees. "It's a good thing to have an awareness that there are other forms of therapy out there, seeing people giving it a go and if people are not getting results from one form of therapy, they can try others," Zaver says.

"There's not one form of therapy that suits all people all the time."

Zaver says cupping is a strong form of therapy and one that she generally uses only if acupuncture is not helping a patient – unless cupping has been specifically requested.

She says she favours traditional cupping, usually a glass cup and flame to create a vacuum, rather than the modern version in which the plastic cup has a pumping mechanism attached.

As well as tight muscles and chest congestion, Zaver says she also has used cupping to treat spider bites, boils and other situations where “poisons needed to be drawn out”.

She says between two and eight glass cups are attached to large muscle areas, such as the back, for between five and 20 minutes, depending on the type and severity of condition being treated.

The colour of the resulting bruises is used as a diagnostic tool and how long they last is an indication of the severity of the condition.

The longer the bruises remain, the tighter the muscles are and the more congested the blood flow.

Zaver says the patient should expect to feel a general release in their muscles pretty much immediately after the cups are removed, which will continue to improve over the next few days.

Australian Medical Association spokeswoman Dr Jeanette Tait says there is no medical or scientific evidence to support the claimed benefits of cupping.

“Fashions come and go just as much in the medical world. This is just another fad sweeping the world, being taken up celebrities,” Tait says.

“I doubt the therapeutic effect would be greater than the placebo effect.”

The Australian Acupuncture & Chinese Medicine Association has a practitioner referral line to direct consumers to qualified practitioners in their area. Phone: 1300 725 334