

Massage Therapy Validation

By Paul Keetley

The last decade has seen an explosion in the acceptance of complementary therapies by the general community. Simultaneously, there has been a positive shift occurring in conventional medicine towards these more 'alternate' practices, as long as there is evidence-based criteria for their use.

The full impact of evidence-based medicine is yet to be felt in the complementary field but some government-regulated bodies, such as WorkCover, already require massage therapists to mount a strong case for treatment based on specific and measurable functional outcomes. More strident requirements from other regulatory and insurance related bodies may follow.

As a result of this movement towards evidence-based protocols for treatment there is a growing need for hands-on therapies of all sorts to confirm the effectiveness of their craft with solid evidence such as the prerequisite randomised control research trial. Unfortunately there is very little of such hard evidence around.

Massage therapy will obviously need to follow these trends however there are few good examples of where massage or any other complementary therapy can prove high yield efficacy. It is therefore a pleasant surprise when a new type of natural noninvasive body stimulation therapy is able to show convincingly that it can reduce chronic pain, improve functionality and reduce disability for a sustained period under randomised control trial (RCT) conditions. Such a trial might be helpful in drafting research guidelines for massage therapists' use in the future.

The ENAR (Electro Neuro Adaptive Regulator) is a new-to-the-West, handheld therapeutic medical device. It is an electro-stimulation device that uses computer modulated 'reflex bio-feedback' to interactively treat problems through the skin. Originating from a study of 'Zonal Contact Massage' and then developed through the Russian Space program, ENAR type therapy has become a main-stream Russian medical modality for treating many disorders.

Macquarie University has just completed an initial pilot study (a full randomised control trial) of the ENAR therapy device. The study showed that ENAR not only gave improved functionality and swift relief from chronic (neck) pain but also improved both mental and emotional health as well, a truly holistic outcome.

Also it was interesting to find that all these improvements were sustained at the six months review – well after the end of the six-week treatment period. The tools used were well-accepted tests in medical research including the Visual Analogue Scale for Pain and the Patient Specific Functional Score as well as the PSF-36 (a general health assessment tool).

The Macquarie University research was conducted using simple treatment and assessment guidelines and pitted the ENAR device therapy against a conventional TENS and a placebo/sham or pretend treatment. Testing was regular up to six months following the six week treatment period.

The ENAR versus TENS study was focused on Chronic Neck Pain. Such a trial would be a pointer towards similar research conducted to assess massage therapy. Macquarie University revealed some interesting support facts to the research project on Neck Pain:

Neck pain is second only to low back pain as the most common musculo-skeletal disorder in population surveys and primary care, and, like low back pain, it poses a significant health and economic burden, being a frequent source of disability. While most individuals with acute neck pain do not seek health care, those that do account for a disproportionate amount of health care costs.

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It also revealed:

- twenty-five per cent of people already have, or will have, chronic neck pain
- they will be twice as likely to be female than male
- the causes are not only physical (but include environmental factors)
- treatments are varied and their effectiveness is inconclusive
- cost of treating patients is increasing and there is no sign of slowing down.

The project aims were to target people with chronic neck pain as participants and evaluate ENAR as a treatment alternative to an already established protocol (TENS). It aimed to evaluate ENAR's effectiveness to both TENS and a control (SHAM) treatment, and ENAR therapy by using both subjective and objective measurements in a controlled and consistent environment.

Macquarie University found ENAR was successful in:

- providing both short and long term reductions in neck pain intensity
- providing long term improvement in both neck and patient specific function
- causing clinically observable reductions in neck disability
- providing both short and long term improvements in both physical and psychological parameters.

Apart from the resistance of some doctors in conventional medicine to 'alternate therapies' there is a general and profound shift going on to find genuine therapeutic solutions to fit into the newer, broader and more natural 'good medicine' paradigm.

With this movement and redefinition, from 'alternate' to 'complementary,' there is a definite requirement for hands-on therapies of all sorts to confirm the effectiveness of their craft with solid evidence.

Paul Keetley is the Managing Director of Enlightened Therapies Pty Ltd, the Australasian distributor for ENAR therapy devices and training. Free information packs and DVDs are available to members. Ph 1300 305 107 and see www.enar.com.au

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