Gua sha

Traditional medicine for pain, inflammation and immune support

Gua sha is an important hands-on medical treatment that has been used throughout Asia for centuries. ***Gua*** means 'to rub' or 'press stroke. ***Sha*** is a term that describes the blood congestion in surface tissue in areas where the patient may experience stiffness and pain; ***sha*** is also the term for the little red dots that are raised from applying *Gua sha* (Nielsen 2012). When *Gua* press-stroking is applied in repeated even strokes, *sha* appears as small red dots called 'petechiae' and the pain immediately shifts. In minutes the small red dots fade into blended reddishness. The *sha* disappears totally in two to three days after treatment. The color of *sha* and rate of fading can indicate important information about a patient's condition. Pain relief lasts even after the *sha* is completely gone.

The benefits of *Gua sha* are numerous. It resolves spasms and pain, and promotes normal circulation to the muscles, tissues and organs, as seen in *Gua sha's* immediate effect on coughing and wheezing. Research has shown that *Gua sha* causes a four-fold increase in microcirculation of surface tissue (Nielsen et al. 2007) and can reduce inflammation and stimulate the immune system (Braun et al. 2011; Chan et al. 2011). Gua sha upregulates heme-oxygenase-1 (HO-1), that acts to reduce internal organ inflammation, for example, in cases of asthma, hepatitis and liver disease.

The patient experiences immediate changes in stiffness and pain with increased mobility. Because *Gua sha* mimics sweating, it can help to resolve fever. *Gua sha* cools the patient who feels too warm, warms the patient who feels too cold, while relaxing tension and reducing anxiety. Acupuncturists and practitioners of traditional East Asian medicine consider *Gua sha* for any illness or condition where there is pain or discomfort, for upper respiratory and digestive problems, and any condition where touch palpation indicates there is *sha*. *Gua sha* is often done in combination with acupuncture for problems that acupuncture alone cannot address.

After treatment the patient is advised to keep the area protected from wind, cold and direct sun until the *sha* fades. They are also encouraged to drink plenty of water and eat moderately.

References

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