

Trigger-point needle helps relieve chronic pain

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Henrico County resident Sally Redfern's neck twitched as Tracey Adler gently pushed a small needle into a knotted muscle on the back of her shoulder.

Redfern, who suffers from chronic neck and shoulder pain, said she felt the tension of the trigger point -- that knot -- release almost immediately.

"It's incredible," she said. Adler helped her with vertigo symptoms a few years ago, Redfern said, through the trigger-point dry needle treatments and other physical therapy.

"She's the only one who helped me," she said, "and she has magic fingers."

Adler has been a physical therapist for nearly 30 years but started using the trigger-point dry needle treatments at her Henrico practice, Orthopedic Physical Therapy Inc., about five years ago. Virginia is one of eight states that allow the technique.

The treatments go like this: Adler searches for places on her patients' bodies that have a trigger point, which is a taut band of muscle, like a knot. Often, she says, the source of the pain is away from the area of the pain. For example, leg pain could be caused by a trigger point in the lower back.

Once she finds it, she sticks a needle directly into that point, which loosens the muscle and allows it to lengthen. Shortened muscles don't function like they should, she said, which means other parts of the body begin to overcompensate, and pain occurs. Trigger points can stem from injuries, stress or repetitive motion.

Inserting the needle doesn't hurt, Adler said, and though patients may be sore afterward, their chronic pain is gone because the pain is treated at the source.

"The needle to me is a precise extension of my fingers," she said. When inserted, "it's like popping a balloon."

Adler said that when she started this, she was treating one or two patients per week. Now, she sees five to 10 each day.

Though she uses acupuncture needles, she stressed that the dry needling is different from acupuncture. The latter is based on restoring energy flow through the body with many needles at one time, rather than relieving pain at specific trigger points with a few. She said she knows after just one or two sessions whether dry needling will help a patient.

"It's another tool that might help some people where nothing else has worked for them," she said. -- Holly Prestidge

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