

DIFFERENT STROKES

THE GENTLE TOUCH



With Ayurveda as a theme for this issue, we cast our eye over a complementary therapy that is still quite new in the West — but which, in India, goes back for millennia. **Louise Wates** writes

Otherwise known as *chamassage*, Indian head massage is said to have been brought to the UK in the 1970s. The word comes from the Indian word *champi*, from which we get the word shampoo. But instead of meaning a form of soap for the hair, or the action of cleaning hair, the term originally meant a type of massage.

The Hobson Jobson Anglo-Indian dictionary defines shampoo as: "To knead and press the muscles with the view of relieving fatigue...The process is described, though not named, by Terry, in 1616: '*Taking thus their ease, they often call their Barbers, who tenderly gripe and smite their Armes and other parts of their bodies instead of exercise, to stirre the bloud. It is a pleasing wantonnesse and much valued in these hot climes*'." (sic)

Today, head massage is still commonly practised in India. Hair oil is a standard item for sale, and it isn't unusual to see mothers or grandmothers oiling children's hair and massaging their scalps at the end of the day. But what exactly defines an ayurvedic head massage is a mystery to the inexperienced punter such as me. I have had an 'ayurvedic' head massage twice and after the first time, vowed never to have one ever again. While on a backpacking trip in India, I thought that a head massage would be a lovely way to pamper myself; but nothing could have prepared me for the pain as my head was pummelled, my hair pulled and my scalp occasionally slapped. Even the area around my eyes didn't escape, and my ears were painfully yanked and tweaked. As I yelped, my masseur told me off sharply because the pain — according to her — was *my* fault. My scalp was very tense, she told me, and I should massage it every day. It was exactly like being told off by the dentist for not flossing.

I have also been told by Indian friends that in the West we have such thin hair because we don't massage our scalps. Certainly there is a belief that scalp massage will help hair growth, possibly by stimulating blood to the hair follicles; although in researching this article I was able to find plenty of anecdotal information but no supporting human studies.

Yet head massage must be considered to have its merits, because some NHS trusts will now offer it as a complementary therapy for patients undergoing treatments for diseases such as cancer — although it is unlikely that the NHS provides the rather vigorous experience I underwent.

Giuliana's work has shown how the treatment may have far-reaching benefits for children and young adults with autism and special needs

Giuliana Fenwick, practitioner and author of *Indian Head Massage For Special Needs*, was trained in the traditional Indian head massage techniques that were brought to the West, but thought them to be "very strong and invasive...To be honest it wasn't a therapy I enjoyed doing as much as my other much softer therapies at that time".

Instead, she prefers a more gentle technique, which she has incorporated into her work with children with autism and special needs, and which she carries out with schools. "Head massage in my opinion," she says, "should never ever be rough or painful. It is about working supportively and with care on each area of the head, and all that each area relates to on an anatomical, physiological and neuropsychological level."

Because sensory overload is common for individuals with autism, Giuliana had to adapt her technique extensively. "When I began giving my autistic son this form of head massage, he found it far too aggressive and it would lead to acute sensory overload," she says. "He actually couldn't bear some of it."

But instead of giving up, Giuliana worked with her son to tailor the treatment to his needs and preferences. "I removed all the 'hacking' and 'chopping' around the head." Although these are standard parts of Indian head massage, Giuliana finds that even many of her clients who do not experience sensory overload find them too much. "The head houses the brain and I just feel, personally, it is too much to use aggressive methods so close to such a fragile area. It is essential to be very holding and nurturing here."

Through working with her son Ollie, Giuliana's work has shown how head massage may have far-reaching benefits for children and young adults with autism and special needs.

Ollie had gone from thriving in top sets at middle school to a local mainstream senior school where he was "told he would never achieve". She says: "His autistic brain, whilst being hugely clever, simply could not fit into a one-size-fits-all, generic, unforgiving, unsupportive mainstream GCSE exam system... Funding I fought so hard to secure for him to have his exams in a different format was spent

legally elsewhere."

She says that Ollie "unravelled" and would repeatedly ask if he was "broken". He also developed chronic OCD and was tested for psychosis. "Psychiatrists and Prozac were all offered."

Because head massage, tailored to what he could tolerate and find beneficial, seemed to help Ollie, Giuliana worked on refining her technique and then took it — free of charge — to schools and specialist academies in her area of Somerset to demonstrate that it could help young people. It wasn't something that she could afford to do, she says, but she believed in the technique. Within six weeks, however, she says that the results came pouring in and she was soon being paid to take her therapy to children on SEN registers everywhere.

"Within six months I was asked to write articles for publications such as *Autism Eye*, and within 12 months I had trained MIND and been flown to Belgium to train ADHD, ASD & LD Belgium." She now trains teaching staff, parents and charities nationally and internationally.

But a more official seal of approval came when her work was evaluated by Ofsted at Foxes Academy in Minehead, which was the subject of the 2015 Channel 5 documentary *The Special Needs Hotel*. "Ofsted pronounced the therapy department at Foxes to be outstanding and innovative, and my work was a large part of that," she says. "The principal went further to say that my therapy had had the biggest impact on the learners in that 12-month period. And in summer 2015, I was presented with the community award for all the work I had done improving the learners' mental and emotional wellbeing."

While she believes head massage can be suitable for everyone, Giuliana says the case is not so with the "traditional westernised massage... Anything abrasive or aggressive around the head should not be part of any head massage routine, in my opinion." She also cautions against anything stimulating on the head for anyone with epilepsy or mental health issues, and says that there is a contraindication in treating anyone who is under three months pregnant. Also, anyone with long term diabetes "should be treated more gently because the skin is



thinner and bruises more easily.”

She also cautions that with cancer patients, therapist should avoid where the cancer is, and areas where lymph is drained. Therapists should ask clients to obtain permission from their GP before having a massage, if there is any doubt.

For anyone who wants to try self-massage, Giuliana says that it can “absolutely” be practised on oneself. But for those who choose to visit a practitioner, she says clients should expect a “personalised, individual, caring treatment... It’s not a conveyer-belt routine to be trotted out regardless of need or condition.” She also says that after receiving a massage, clients should never have bruises. “The client should feel they would love to come back!”

So it seems that the saying of ‘no pain no gain’ might be untrue — something I discovered too late.

In the decade plus since that first painful experience, I have probably massaged my scalp (feebly and unprofessionally, I may add) about twice a year. I have certainly felt better for it, my scalp feeling

invigorated and my mind convinced that I will suddenly develop thick, lustrous hair — although that hasn’t happened yet. So during a recent trip to India, I was quite keen to be pummelled again.

In a little shack near the sea I was attended to by Rani, a tiny, dainty woman with deceptively delicate hands that seemed to possess the strength of a docker. Because I knew what was in store I didn’t complain, and went along with the buffeting. This time, I decided that having the line along my eyebrows tweaked and massaged actually felt good, as if my frown lines were being dissolved. (I checked — they weren’t.)

But I did become a little concerned when Rani strapped a device onto her hand that looked not dissimilar to a video camera, only more menacing. As she went to plug it into a set of sockets and wires that looked no more reliable than a plate of wet spaghetti held together with brown tape, I gulped nervously. This, she told me, was for “vibration”.

With that, Rani continued the massage but with the extra force one might get

from resting one’s head against the washing machine during the fast spin. It did cross my mind whether my brain should be getting such a battering.

Perhaps ‘ayurvedic’ massage has moved on since the days of the ancients!

However, it is increasingly finding a place alongside ‘conventional’ Western therapies (let’s keep in mind that in India, Ayurveda would be considered conventional). In a small Australian study on 50 patients undergoing alcohol withdrawal, it was found that patients given head massage showed “reductions in pulse rate on three of the four days of treatment compared to the control group. Massage was also more effective in reducing Alcohol Withdrawal Scale scores in the early stages of the detoxification process. Respiration in the massage group was reduced toward the end of the detoxification admission”.^{2,3}

Perhaps simply receiving some nurturing contact was a contributing factor to patients’ positive response. But in the absence of science and in the great scheme of things, is that so bad?

References:

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