Numb Toes and Aching Soles: Coping with Peripheral Neuropathy
John A Senneff

Hardback, Pages: 336, Price: $29.95
ISBN 0-9671107-2-6

Paperback, Pages 336, Price: $19.95
ISBN 0-9671107-1-8


The promotional material on the cover of this book promises a great deal, attracting the reader with phrases such as "superbly researched and readable". Always cautious about such praise in the publisher's blurb, on the grounds that they would say that, wouldn't they?, it was a delight to discover in this case that it is absolutely true. This is a paragon of self-help books which should be read by all patients with peripheral neuropathy - and probably their doctors.

The greatest value of this book lies not just in the fact that every possible therapy is covered (as well as some pretty impossible ones), not just that it really is easy to read or skim, even with no prior knowledge of the subject, but that it is realistic and sensible. All treatments are presented objectively, then any research evidence is discussed critically. Safety and possible side-effects of the therapy follow, and finally the testimonies of patients with peripheral neuropathy who have actually tried the treatments - whether successful or not! The author is enthusiastic for readers to go and try out different therapies (safely) that may work for them, but he puts aside all his own subjective enthusiasm for any particular treatment; this is an example for other self-help books to emulate, particularly those on complementary medicine.

After going into some detail on the symptoms, causes, diagnosis and investigations of peripheral neuropathy, the book has a 60-page section on the available drugs. This is complete as well as being comprehensible to every reader: even spinal neuronal inhibition is there with the phrase "GABA prevents our nerve cells firing too fast". Research from as recently as 1998 is included and is a mark of the comprehensive effort the author has made to discover everything that should be said on the topic. Haematological and experimental immunological treatments follow and nerve blocks are given 4 pages with the expected disappointing commentators from patients.

The author then moves on to alternative therapies, listing them in descending order of "acceptance by the medical profession". Acupuncture comes fourth, after physical therapy, psychotherapies of all sorts, and hyperbaric oxygen. The presentation of acupuncture is fair and covers both the traditional and the Western approaches. He demolishes the commonly stated argument that acupuncture must be effective, viz that it has survived thousands of years, by noting that astrology has too! He records that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has stated that "peripheral neuropathy responds well to acupuncture" and quotes both a controlled trial which found no benefit, and an uncontrolled series of patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy in 77% of whom acupuncture gave significant relief. He ends this section with testimonies from 9 patients, none of whom was helped! I would guess that that is the experience of most practising acupuncturists, who find it is difficult to achieve any more lasting results in patients with peripheral neuropathy than a temporary response to hope and expectation.

The following sections deal with herbs, vitamins and nutritional supplements, which reminds the reader that, like the section on drugs, the trade names and commercial preparations are all given in the American versions. However, this should be less of a barrier to patients exploring these treatments for themselves now that it is so easy to make purchases using the internet.

In case all else fails, the book ends with yet another eminently sensible chapter, this time on coping, with advice on exercise, help with sleep, footcare etc. This rounds off a book which I cannot sum up in any way better than another piece of publisher's blurb, "An informative and exhaustive work and a valuable resource to patients and physicians".

Adrian White

A patient perspective
The book is written by a person who suffers from peripheral neuropathy himself. As such he fully understands the need these patients have for support and for information about possible treatments, including alternative therapies. The book primarily aims at the sufferers, although we believe it would be helpful to GPs too, in making them aware of this disorder and the pain and discomfort it causes.
In addition it does provide an overview of treatments currently available and an insight to research being carried out. It does not try to offer definitive answers for fellow sufferers but gives a valuable source of information for patients to discuss with their doctors.

We found the book easy to read and follow; however suggest that readers will find it helpful to have a drugs directory readily at hand for reference, and to ensure that they are fully aware of any contra-indications the medications discussed may have.

The book covers a very wide range of treatments that have been tried. Although it is good to have the coverage, it does leave the reader slightly confused and lost in all the options touched on. The section we found of most benefit dealt with nutrients, particularly vitamins: this appears to be an area which might result in substantial benefit to the patient with minimal risk. From our own experience it is also a treatment that GPs do not seem to explore in depth or prescribe to patients. Further investigation in the use of vitamin B could be very worthwhile.

Little seems to be known about the healing effects of magnetic fields; but again this is touched on in the book and we found this helpful. Conventional pain relieving medication is adequately covered; although we feel that most sufferers would be aware of such medication through discussion with their doctors.

Following each section on a form of treatment, the author has included a selection of patients' comments regarding that particular treatment. These patient reports are useful; however it is difficult to form any conclusions from them as it is not clear why particular comments were selected, nor how representative they are, nor whether they are a true reflection of the outcomes being experienced.

In general we found the book to be informative and valuable in providing patients with an overview of available treatments for them to evaluate further, although care needs to be taken with some therapies not to experiment without taking medical advice first. Coping with this disorder is a real problem for sufferers and the book contains some useful information that may well be of assistance and should be considered by patients. The real benefits come from the fact that the author, being a sufferer, has a sound understanding of this condition and has written the book from a patient's perspective. It appeared that he was trying to present a balanced view rather than put forward his own opinions. Although this is commendable and very understandable, particularly in view of potential litigation, it did tend to make it difficult for non-medical readers to draw any conclusions.

There is no mention of other nervous system problems that may be allied to this disorder, in particular those of bladder and bowel. However the title is specifically “Coping with Peripheral Neuropathy”, so we appreciate that they may be considered beyond the scope of the book, but do feel that for completeness they should at least have been touched on.

In summary: the book is certainly most helpful and does offer potentially useful information and sound advice for peripheral neuropathy sufferers that will opens their minds to fresh areas of treatment or self-help to be considered further.

A web site is now available at www.medpress.com which features the book, provides ordering details and offers more information for doctors and patients.

John and Evelyn Hawker

Sir Thomas Lewis: Pioneer Cardiologist and Clinical Scientist
Arthur Hollman

Hardback, Pages: 300, Price: £39.50
Springer Verlag, Berlin (1997)
ISBN 3 540 76049 0

Sir Thomas Lewis was not only a pioneering cardiologist but also a leading clinical researcher of his day. It was in his department that JH Kellgren conducted his research on referred pain in the 1930s: research which is still of importance to the current understanding of pain patterns.

Both Lewis and Kellgren were interested in the fact that muscle pain did not always arise from the place where it was felt, however it was Kellgren who did nearly all the investigations, with Lewis coming into the laboratory each day to discuss results and jointly plan further progress. Kellgren went on to a distinguished career as Professor of Rheumatology at the University of Manchester.

Sir Thomas was an admirer and colleague of Sir James Mackenzie. Like Mackenzie, he was particularly interested in cardiac arrhythmias and similarly his research also involved the study of pain, Mackenzie having studied viscero-somatic pain closely in 1893.

In 1936 Sir Thomas published for the first time his hypothesis that there existed special pain fibres which he termed the “nocifensor system”. At that time no such nerves had been shown to exist anatomically. Nevertheless, he was eventually
proved correct: the nocifensor fibres are now known as C fibres.

One of the best remembered aspects of Sir Thomas's work which is still of relevance to acupuncture was his analysis in the 1920s of the triple response, and it was he who first inferred its association with the release of histamine.

He also wrote on muscle pain induced by ischaemia and postulated the presence of a pain chemical which he labelled "Factor P". He went on in 1933, together with Pickering and Rothschild, to investigate the double pain response of the skin to needle prick, successfully predicting the presence of slower conducting pain fibres within peripheral nerves.

For anyone interested in the history of medicine this book is an absolute gem and the author is to be congratulated.

Back and Neck pain: the Facts
Loïc Burn

Oxford University Press (2000)
ISBN 0 19 263077 6

This paperback is part of a series published by Oxford University Press designed to present the salient facts about specific medical problems to the general public in an easily understandable and practical format. Back and neck pain does just this and covers the sorts of questions that patients regularly ask, such as: What is it? How will it affect me? What treatments are available? and What can I do to help myself?

The author, Loïc Burn, is an immensely experienced musculoskeletal physician and, as well as teaching doctors on postgraduate courses, is a medical advisor to the National Back Pain Association. He has included the latest back pain management guidelines and reviews of clinical effectiveness for a range of treatments: orthodox and complementary.

This book will be of great value to patients wishing to know more about their neck and back pain and, I suspect, of more than a passing interest to clinicians. It can be warmly recommended.

Return to Wholeness: Embracing Body, Mind and Spirit in the Face of Cancer
David Simon

Hardback, Pages: 275, Price £19.99
John Wiley and Sons (1999)
ISBN 0 471 29577 9

This book, with its foreword by Deepak Chopra, incorporates the healing approaches used at the Chopra Center for Well Being in California. It is based on Dr Simon's clinical experience of guiding patients with cancer along a healing journey at the centre's Return to Wholeness programme.

Dr Simon trained as a neurologist, but studied anthropology before entering medical school. He is particularly interested in how healing occurs in different societies throughout the world (including China) and he draws on this knowledge for his book. He aims to integrate the best of Western medical technology with an understanding of patients' natural healing forces. The 15 chapters provide supportive and practical information on a variety of mind-body paradigms and techniques, together with discussion of a range of complementary therapies.

The text can be used by both patients and clinicians as a general source of integrated medical care, as well as a practical guide for those suffering illness who wish to explore additional avenues of support.

Adam Ward

Abstract Reviews


Wounds in 34 patients, which had failed to heal with prior therapy, were treated with an electrical current set at 0.6 coulombs/cm²/day passed through needles surrounding the periphery of the wound. An electroacupuncture stimulator was utilised. Ten patients with second degree burn wounds were similarly treated, using saline soaked gauze over the surface and alligator clamps to the gauze in place of needles. Those with non-burn wounds had a variety of compromising disorders including obesity, diabetes, and ischaemia. The authors have
A patient perspective

John and Evelyn Hawker

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