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The magic wand that cured my tennis elbow - without the need for surgery

By Anastasia Stephens

Until the beginning of this year, orthopaedic surgeon Nick Fernandez had accepted chronic pain as something he would have to endure.

Suffering from tennis elbow, a condition caused by overuse of the muscles and tendons of the forearm, he could not lift heavy objects, or even firmly shake a patient's hand without wincing.

Now, thanks to innovative new treatment, he is pain-free and so thrilled with the results that he is offering it to his own patients. Called Extracorporeal Shockwave Therapy (ESWT), it involves a wand that emits high-energy soundwaves, otherwise known as shockwaves, to the injured area, which trigger the healing process.

Partial pain relief is often felt immediately. There is no recovery period and patients can get on with their daily activities as usual between treatments. Permanent results can be expected six to 12 weeks after the final session.

Nick, 56, who works at The Winterbourne Hospital in Dorchester, first noticed a searing pain in his right elbow after playing tennis 18 months ago.

Affecting around 31,000 British adults, the condition, also known as lateral epicondylitis, can be caused by any activity that involves repetitive use of the extensor muscles in the forearm.

The key symptom is pain on the outside of the elbow, caused by inflammation of ligaments and degeneration of tissue around the joint. This makes twisting movements and lifting objects painful.

'Just picking up a kettle or tying my shoelaces became uncomfortable,' explains Nick. 'And I'd feel pain while operating on patients, especially when using heavy tools. I couldn't play tennis and the aching took the fun away from kite-surfing, another sport I love.'

Anti-inflammatory painkillers often help to reduce mild pain. But when discomfort is more severe, steroid injections, which reduce inflammation, or surgery may be needed to remove tissue around the elbow joint and ease pressure.

But this often means a long recovery, and for Nick, who runs his own private surgical practice, this was not an option. 'I would have needed to take three months off work and I just couldn't do that,' he says.

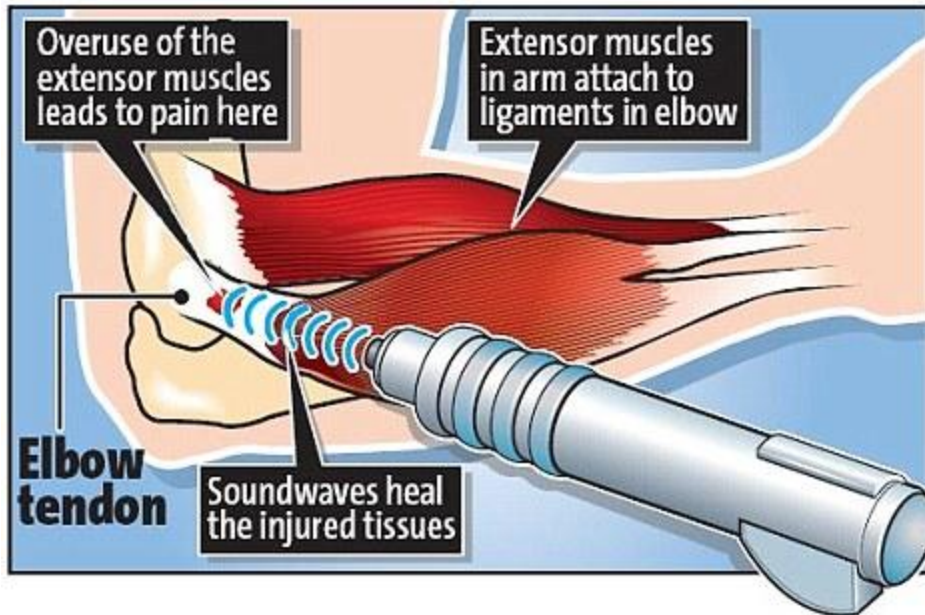
ESWT was first developed 20 years ago as a treatment for kidney stones. Researchers then started to investigate other applications and found it effective in relieving orthopaedic pain.

Last year, the treatment was approved by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence for NHS use on tennis elbow, if physiotherapy, painkillers or anti-inflammatory medication do not alleviate the condition and surgery is the only other option.

Nick met the Dorset-based manufacturers of a new device, specifically adapted to deliver ESWT to the foot and elbow, at a conference and agreed to trial the machine as a patient himself.

Treatment usually consists of three to five sessions, each lasting between ten and 20 minutes.

While the patient is reclining the area to be treated is covered with a fine gel. A vibrating hand-held wand attached to a generator is placed over the injured area, where it delivers shockwaves.



How the Shockwave technology combats pain

'It feels a little uncomfortable but not painful, and the machine makes a slight whirring noise,' says Nick.

After four ten-minute treatments at weekly intervals and a three-month healing period, he was cured. 'Gradually, the pain started to disappear. Now I can do everything I want, including play tennis,' he says.

Nick was so impressed with the results that he invested in the equipment and is now among the first orthopaedic surgeons in the country to be offering the therapy.

'The treatment turned my life around and it is proving very effective for patients too,' he says. 'It can treat a range of sports injuries as well as tendon inflammation caused by repetitive strain. As well as elbow problems, it can be used to ease foot and ankle pain.'

In a trial on 100 patients at Gutenberg University Hospital, Germany, ESWT alleviated pain and improved function in all tennis elbow sufferers, with 48 per cent reporting an excellent result.

And research published in the American Journal Of Sports Medicine found ESWT led to a complete recovery in 60 per cent of patients with painful, inflammatory conditions of the feet.

'In animal studies which examined tissue around painful joints before and after ESWT, the treatment was shown to lead to a reduction in the number of pain-carrying nerve fibres,' says Nick.

'Researchers have also found that just one treatment can lead to a decrease in chemicals released by nerves that convey pain and inflammation.'

Nicola Maffulli, Professor of Sports and Exercise Medicine at Queen Mary's University of London, is currently assessing ESWT. She explains: 'The shockwaves trigger the formation of new blood vessels, as well as the natural healing process.'

'It can successfully treat chronic injuries, especially those affecting tendons and ligaments which have a poor blood supply, so tend to heal slowly.'

'While this isn't a short-term fix like steroids, it offers a long-term cure and is a much better alternative to surgery as it is non-invasive and you are left with no scar.'

However, Prof Maffulli warns there are limitations. 'ESWT has not been found to work on acute injuries,' she cautions.

'So if you have twisted your knee or sprained your ankle, causing severe damage to tendons or joints, it won't help. But where people have chronic inflammation,

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