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New treatment relieves pain of repetitive strain

Elite athletes have been using it for more than a decade.

By Rick Ansorge

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

What do Canadian Olympic sprinter Donovan Bailey, professional hockey player Gary Roberts and Colorado Springs homemaker Bernadette Triche have in common?

They've all had repetitive strain injuries fixed by a non-invasive technique developed by a Colorado Springs chiropractor and now practiced by nearly 20 physical and occupational therapists and other health-care providers in the United States.

The procedure, a soft-tissue manipulation called active release techniques (ART), has been used to treat elite athletes for more than a decade.

But it only recently became available to the general public, so many doctors and patients are still unfamiliar with it.

Little formal research has been conducted, although the results of one major study are expected to be released later this month.

But inventor Michael Leahy and his colleagues claim a 96 percent success rate (defined as being able to return to work) based on 8,000 cases treated since 1993.

Bailey, dubbed the world's fastest human, credits the procedure for fine-tuning his body before winning the gold medal in the 100 meters at last year's Olympics.

Roberts, who was sidelined from the Calgary Flames for a year and a half with a neck and nerve injury, credits it for getting him back on the ice with the Carolina Hurricanes.

Triche, who could barely lift a bag of groceries after a shoulder injury, credits it for restoring the use of her left arm.

Since the early 1980s Leahy has developed several hundred active release treatments for repetitive strain injuries, which cost American society an estimated \$20 billion a year in workers compensation claims and \$80 billion a year in absenteeism and reduced productivity. RSI injuries include carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis and lower back strain.

Most of Leahy's treatments are aimed at manually breaking up adhesions, the scar tissue that entraps muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves. Traditional medical treatments range from anti-inflammatory drugs, deep-tissue massage, stretching, splinting and surgery.

Dr. Michael Brown, a Colorado Springs neurosurgeon, says surgery is 85 percent effective for patients with persistent numbness, muscle weakness and diminished nerve conduction through the carpal tunnel.

Such serious cases probably wouldn't benefit from active release techniques, Brown says. "It wouldn't make them worse. But it just wouldn't be worth the time and money."

Still, he's impressed with the procedure's effectiveness in treating less-serious cases.

"I would use it myself before getting surgery if I didn't have significant nerve damage," he says. "Before anyone has surgery, they should exhaust all non-surgical means of getting relief."

The new procedure is similar to some massage techniques, only it's more aggressive.

"The art of it all is being able to know where to look for adhesions, how to feel for them and how to use active motion of the body part to break them up." Leahy says. There are 35 places that can trap the

nerves in the arm."

Active motion separates this procedure from most other soft-tissue manipulation techniques.

"To break an adhesion, you actually have to put your thumb and fingers on it and make it move in a way that breaks it away from the tissues," he says.

During a session, which can last as long as an hour and as short as a few minutes, both the therapist and the patient can feel the adhesion rip apart.

"It kinda hurts," Leahy says. "But most people describe it as 'hurts good'."

According to Leahy, only three to six sessions are needed to fix a problem. The results are so instantaneous that many patients can work out after a treatment. While some patients need further treatments, most can maintain the improvements with proper diet, exercise and stretching, he says.

Until recently, the procedure and its originator were two of Colorado Springs' best-kept secrets.

"For many years, it's just been us," Leahy says of the clinic he operates with another chiropractor and an occupational therapist. Recently, however, he has trained and certified about 600 people, mostly at the University of California-San Diego Medical School, where Leahy is about to receive an associate professorship.

Diane Jones, a physical therapist in Colorado Springs, took Leahy's course and has since performed the procedure on eight patients with repetitive strain injuries affecting their shoulders, necks and arms. Jones hesitates to call it a breakthrough however.

"I consider it another tool to use," It has the potential to work on lots of people but it's not necessarily going to fix everyone.