

IT'S A SIMPLE PROCEDURE – BUT IT PROVIDES ALMOST INSTANT AND DESPERATELY WELCOME RELIEF

By Michelle Pieters



ROWEN LOMBARD



WHEN TO GO TO A DOCTOR

- If you have headaches more than three times a week.
- If headaches affect a normal lifestyle.
- If they're so bad you take painkillers every day and more than recommended.
- If you have a stiff neck and high temperature.
- If you're short of breath, dizzy, drowsy or confused.



No more MIGRAINES!

THE pain once kept her flat on her back for 14 days in a dark room with ice-packs on her head. The migraine was so bad she couldn't sleep, eat or watch TV. Frequent migraines had caused her to miss 100 days from work in a year.

Many people thought she was exaggerating. "They understand when someone has heart disease or cancer but they just don't realise how bad a migraine can be," Liana Loots (26), a Johannesburg dietician, says. "They think you're using it as an excuse."

She suffered with migraines for years – until a groundbreaking operation by a South

African surgeon changed her life. The procedure, performed by Dr Elliot Shevel, head of the Headache Clinic in Johannesburg, is a world first and details have now been published in a British medical journal.

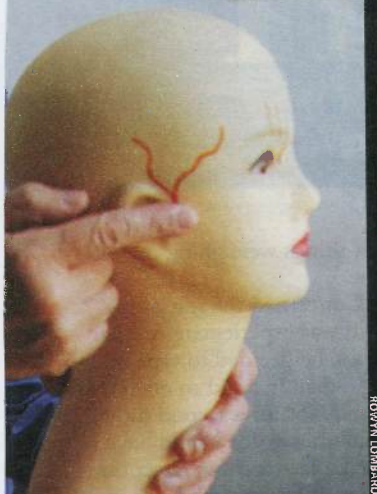
Liana had the operation two months ago and hasn't had a migraine since.

Headaches had turned her life upside down. She often missed

work and extended migraines kept her away from birthday celebrations and family occasions. She battled the problem for nine years, then last March it suddenly got worse.

"I couldn't work, see people or even talk on the phone," Liana says. "I went to several specialists. They all prescribed stuff for the symptoms but no one could find the cause."

'I finally know **what it's like** to function normally **for a whole day**'



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ABOVE: Dr Elliot Shevel of the Headache Clinic in Johannesburg points to the surface arteries that are tied off during the operation. **FAR LEFT:** Liana Loots, a dietician in Johannesburg, has plenty to smile about because she hasn't had a migraine since her operation.



HEADACHE CLINIC

ABOVE LEFT: A mark is made on the side of the head and the area is anaesthetised. **LEFT and ABOVE:** The incision and artery to be tied off are clearly visible.

Then she heard about the Headache Clinic and about the operation – but she was sceptical at first. “It wasn't widely known and people said I should get a second opinion. But I was desperate. I decided I'd had enough and was going to go for it.”

Her first thought when she awoke after the op was, “Thank God! The pain has

gone! I can live a normal life.” She was discharged the same day. “Now I finally know what it's like to function normally for a whole day,” Liana says.

Dr Shevel, a maxillofacial surgeon (specialising in the jaw, face and mouth), is excited about his groundbreaking procedure. He's the only surgeon in the world who performs it and hopes to train other doctors to do the op.

Until now doctors have believed tiny arteries in the brain cause the pain and that only medication can help, he says. Then by chance he came to realise surface blood vessels beneath the scalp were the culprits in many cases.

In 1995 he was about to operate on a patient's mouth when she complained of a severe headache.

“I noticed a tiny blood vessel pulsing on the side of her head. When I pressed it the pain disappeared. When I lifted my finger it returned. I had no doubt these arteries were causing the pain and it would not be risky to tie them off.”

Dr Shevel performed the procedure and his patient hasn't had a headache since.

Thirteen years and many ops later he's publishing details of his work. “I first wanted to determine if the operations would be successful in the long term,” he says.

His most recent research was done with Dr Egilius Spierings, a professor of neurology at Harvard University in America. Their results recently appeared in the medical journal *Therapy*.

Things have moved fast since then. The South African government has given Dr Shevel a grant to conduct research overseas once a year for three years and in July he's off for Sardinia to work with Italian migraine expert Professor Carlo Cianchetti of the University of Cagliari.

“Together we'll determine methods to help other doctors to diagnose the condition correctly and to operate,” he says.

Headaches are caused mainly by muscle spasms in the neck and shoulders and by surface blood vessels, he explains.

His procedure is applicable only in the latter cases – but they constitute up to 50 per cent of sufferers.

The procedure involves making a small incision on the side or back of the head then cauterising small blood vessels beneath the scalp. It takes 30 to 90 minutes and costs between R3 000 and R30 000, depending on the number of blood vessels involved. Some medical aids cover the cost of the procedure.

HEADACHES are among the most common reasons for absenteeism – up to 20 per cent of the world's population suffers from them, Dr Shevel says.

“The difference between a headache and a migraine is the degree of pain. When you become nauseous and sensitive to light and sound a headache has become a migraine.”

People should take note of what causes their headaches. For instance caffeine – and caffeine withdrawal – can trigger them.

“That's why some people have headaches only on weekends. When they sleep late on a Saturday and don't get their early morning coffee as they do during the week they suffer withdrawal symptoms.”

Low blood sugar can also be a cause, especially if you don't have breakfast. Weather changes and sun exposure are also culprits, as are hormone fluctuations – that's why women are three times more likely than men to suffer headaches.

But thanks to Dr Shevel your days of migraine hell could be over. □

HOW TO COPE WITH HEADACHES

DO

- Eat a balanced diet. Make sure you take in sufficient magnesium, calcium and vitamin B₂ which help to prevent headaches.
- An ice pack on your forehead will help to narrow swollen arteries and relieve tension headaches.
- Avoid bright flashing lights. Even a TV or computer screen could contribute to your headache.
- Breathing deeply helps you to relax, relieves tension and provides more oxygen to your blood vessels.
- Massage your neck and shoulders or have it done by a therapist.
- Stretch for at least five minutes a day to loosen stiff muscles.
- Keep a headache diary: when did it start, how long did it last and could something you ate have triggered it?
- Exercise regularly to relieve tension and stimulate circulation.

DON'T

- Skip meals. Keep your blood sugar level stable by eating regularly and at least three times a day.
- Take too many painkillers. Your body gets used to them and they make headaches worse in the long run.
- Lose out on sleep. You must sleep seven or eight hours a night. Tiredness is a major cause of headaches.
- Sleep on your stomach or in any other position that might cause muscle spasms in your neck.