



# Regaining the 'life force'

In the first of a series about the work of natural therapists in torture and trauma treatment services, **Sue Roxon** speaks with natural therapist Marina Chand, exploring the particular relevance of this approach to survivors of torture and trauma.

Marina practices homeopathy, one of the most popular medical systems in the world, with the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma.

One way in which 'natural medicine' is distinct from Western mainstream medicine, is in its belief in the concept of 'vitality' or 'vital energy' or 'life force'. This cannot be measured in a scientific sense, but only experienced subjectively and manifested in good health and a feeling of wellbeing. Its depletion results in disease and poor health.

The life force is called 'Prana' in traditional Indian medicine, 'Chi' in traditional Chinese medicine, and 'Hara' in the Japanese system. English does not have an equivalent term, although 'spirit' may be the closest. Many practitioners use the word 'energy', although this is a scientific term in Western culture because it is objectively measurable. Because 'life force' or 'vitality' is not objectively measurable, its existence is not acknowledged by Western science.

As users of health care, we all feel the presence of vitality, or not, within our own lives, which may explain why medicine which includes the subjective concept of 'Chi' in its aims is so popular. One of Marina's clients was Hasan Bojic, a survivor of the war in from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Suffering from depression, insomnia, muscle and bone pains, Hasan was treated homeopathically and says, "This therapy brought visible improvements in a very short period of time. My sleep and appetite have improved, depression reduced and my whole physical and psychological construction is generally more stable".

The practitioners of natural or complementary medicine interviewed for this series believe that 'Chi' is particularly relevant to survivors of torture and trauma as it has been so seriously depleted by deprivation and human barbarity.

## **Marina, what is homeopathy?**

Homeopathy is a system of medicine developed by Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843), a German physician who was disillusioned with conventional medicine. It is based on the principle of 'like cures like', that small doses of a medicine which produces symptoms of diseases in healthy people, will cure these symptoms in sick people. Hahnemann first discovered this when he took cinchona bark, which is the natural source of quinine and was being used to treat malaria at the time. He found that it gave him the symptoms of malaria. He explored this phenomenon by giving small doses of this medicine, and many other naturally occurring substances, to healthy people. Slowly over the years he build up a list of drugs and the symptoms they produced in well people and then gave the corresponding drug when a patient presented with those symptoms. Coffee, for instances, stimulates the central nervous system and increase urine output – homeopathic coffee can help people with symptoms of agitation and excessive urine output.

Hahnemann also found that some patients were made worse by the doses he had developed, so he started

diluting and potentiating the medicines by shaking them, and discovered that the medicines became more powerful in dilute form. Many homeopathic medicines contain few if any of the molecules of the original substance from which they were made. This obviously challenges the scientific understanding of the workings of medicine, although homeopathy is popular with many Western medical doctors, particularly in Europe and India.

### **Why do you find homeopathy so useful with the clients of QPASTT?**

Because homeopathy works energetically rather than chemically, it doesn't interact with any pharmaceutical drugs the patients may be taking, and is therefore relatively safe. It's also non-addictive (which is a common concern with our clients). Homeopathy is also very cheap because it is so dilute. This is one of the reasons homeopathy is the second most popular medical system in the world (after Chinese medicine) and a homeopathic dispensary can be found even in the poorest village in India. The dropper and bottle the medicine is stored in are usually more expensive than the medicine itself! The effects of homeopathy can be felt quite quickly, which can restore a lot of confidence in clients that their health problems won't last forever.

### **How does homeopathy help highly traumatised people?**

It helps on many levels. First of all, it offers symptom relief. And by alleviating local symptoms or particular ailments, it can highlight an emotional issue associated with that symptom which can then be addressed through counseling.



Homeopathy doesn't split mind and body, so it reaffirms people as whole people and agrees with the traumatised clients' experience of themselves as having both physical and emotional symptoms. For example, a person for whom the remedy Aconite is prescribed may be experiencing intense fear, restlessness, anxiety, panic, have a full, heavy head, a dry mouth and throat, nausea, vomiting, oppressed breathing, heart palpitations and frequent nightmares. All homeopathic assessments ask "how do you feel?" as well as "where does it hurt", and

that helps the splitting of body from mind which so often happens in torture survivors. Homeopathy doesn't distinguish between mental and physical symptoms either in the assessment or the treatment.

Over time, too, homeopathy can increase a person's vitality, and restore function to organs and systems because it doesn't suppress symptoms. Symptoms are often a sign of the body's effort to deal with a disease (like the raised temperature accompanying an infection) and by suppressing these symptoms, as pharmaceutical drugs often do, the body's self-curing and defensive mechanisms are also suppressed and can become ineffective.

I think all therapeutic intervention with highly traumatised people should arouse the person's innate self-healing ability – that constant striving, in all organisms, to return to a state of equilibrium. I would argue that a therapeutic intervention – and that includes counselling – is successful only insofar as it assists the client's drive to self heal.

People report feeling better, sleeping better, with an increase in energy and their ability to cope. In follow up sessions I always ask, "How are your energy levels? How are you coping?"

We also use other natural therapies at QPASTT. We use Australian Bush Flower essences, nutritional supplements, acupuncture, aromatherapy and massage therapy, and we hold a weekly yoga class.

### **Tell me why you give nutritional advice.**

Nutrition is important for our clients because they have often experienced past starvation and may have been left with continuing malnourishment. **Due to the effects of the past starvation?** Yes, in part. Another reason which is often overlooked is that there are substantial nutrient/drug interactions. Long term medication, particularly, can affect the absorption of certain nutrients, but this varies between individuals. Also, being constantly anxious or in pain, for example, affects nutrient uptake and requirements.

### **I know that nicotine and caffeine have this affect on Vitamin C. How do you present your nutritional advice when beliefs about food and eating habits are so culturally determined, and what advice do you give to people who have been diagnosed with high levels of blood fat, as so many of our clients have been?**

I spend time finding out what people like eating. People are often given a list of don'ts by their GP's. They actually need a list of do's which are easier to follow than a whole





lot of restrictions, especially if they are to continue eating traditional foods. For instance, I give them a list of foods that assist in the reduction of LDL blood fats, like olive oil and cold-pressed nut oils, and carrots. I will often start people off with a bottle of flax seed oil, with advice on how to use and store it. We develop diets taking into account the diet they are used to. We also use supplements.

**Who pays for these?**

Everything is provided free of charge.

**Which gets us onto the topic of funding....**

The natural therapies program is funded from the core budget. We have been fortunate to receive donations from companies such as Australian Bush Flower Essences and the Perfect Potion.

**And a lot of your natural therapists are volunteers...**

For almost three years I was the only paid worker, but recently we employed a one-day per week massage therapist. A large part of my job as coordinator of the natural therapies program is to coordinate and supervise the volunteers, as well as matching client with therapist. We have six volunteers each with a maximum workload of two appointments a week. Two have been here as long as me; they stay a long time! We received a \$10,000 grant in the International Year of the Volunteer, which was used to support volunteers to have access to professional development and information, including a library, and to enable us to develop a proper volunteer induction kit. It's fantastic to use volunteers but sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that volunteers lighten our work load whereas we need to be mindful that having volunteers is actually a job in itself. It's really important to support them properly so that they can feel happy about being a volunteer and to ensure the quality of the service is there.

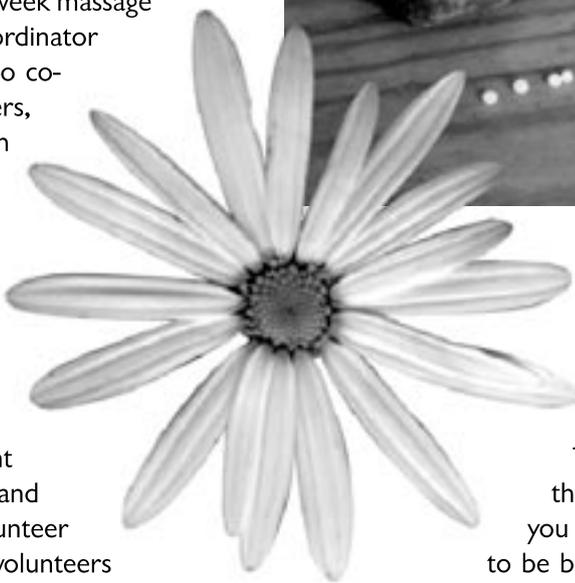
**And flower essences? Are they made the same way as Bach flower remedies but of Australian plants?**

Yes, they are useful for when people are hypersensitive, even to a low dose of homeopathy. They are used until the energy levels pick up. They address problems like fear, anxiety, sleeplessness, adrenal fatigue. Counsellor advocates have started to use them with clients, and even for themselves and their families.

**Can you describe someone who has been helped by the natural therapies program?**

There was a woman who'd had trigeminal neuralgia for several years. She'd had many investigative procedures and tests and drugs. She had been hospitalised several times because of severe pain, and had been referred to us for anxiety. She was so fed up with medical interventions she didn't even want to take homeopathic medicine, so we decided on a minimalist approach - flower essences and mineral supplements only. After six months of this she only had infrequent low level pain in the gum and after nine months I was satisfied that her improved condition was stable. She could now sleep more and had more ability to cope with a bad day.

This is radically different to the orthodox medical approach which would be likely to respond to the severity



of the symptoms in trauma survivors with extra strong intervention. You certainly see that with antidepressant and sleeping medication prescribed for our clients. The stronger the symptoms the higher the dosage. Whereas you respected this woman's desire to be basically left alone, and gave her just enough support to enable her return to 'normal'. It seems that the subtlety and sensitivity of natural remedies like homeopathy and flower essences suggest that the more traumatised a person is, the more sensitive they are, and the more subtle and gentle the approach needs to be.

**Could we finish with what attracts you to working with torture and trauma survivors?**

I like working with people who really need to see you but would not otherwise get a chance (in private practice). My philosophy of social justice developed over the years can now be applied through natural therapies, and there is nowhere else I can do that. Personally, I find the work really satisfying. ■