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This Week

Breathless

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In the UK, over three million people have asthma. Some suffer so acutely that day to day living is a struggle.



Donna Gowrie spends much of the day in bed. She cannot walk for more than a few yards without getting out of breath.

Professor Konstantin Buteyko, a Russian physiologist, has devised a controversial therapy known as the Buteyko method, which is based on his belief that most asthmatics hyperventilate.

QED follows Donna and three others, on an intensive five day course which could revolutionise their lives.

In the UK, 3.4 million people have asthma, the number of cases are increasing and over a thousand sufferers die every year. The rise in asthma seems to be particularly fast in children and although there are a number of theories, there is currently no convincing explanation as to why this is.

A new treatment called the Buteyko method has recently arrived in Britain. It has aroused considerable scepticism because it is based on an unproven theory that asthma is caused by hyperventilating. The treatment simply involves teaching asthma sufferers to breathe less.

The Buteyko method was named after the man who developed it, leading Russian physiologist, Professor Konstantin Buteyko.



It was introduced to Britain a couple of years ago and out of the several hundred asthma sufferers who have tried it, many have noticed their condition improve. This does not amount to scientific evidence, but several doctors, who have tried it have also been impressed, so QED decided to put it to the test.

The principal behind Buteyko is that the carbon dioxide we exhale is not just a waste gas, we need a quantity in our blood stream. Chronic over-breathing leads to an excessive loss of carbon dioxide. So far, no scientist would disagree with this. However the advocates of Buteyko go on to claim that the narrowing of the bronchial tubes in an asthma attack is the body trying to stop you exhaling too much carbon dioxide. So if you hold your breath for longer, your carbon-dioxide levels should rise and the bronchi expand again. This part of the theory is regarded by many doctors as nonsense.

Professor Bill MacNee is a specialist in respiratory medicine at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. He has read books about Buteyko and is certainly sceptical about their claims as to how it might work.

However, he was prepared to let a couple of his patients, with severe asthma, try the Buteyko method. Donna Gowrie's asthma has been so debilitating that she's been unable to work for eight years. She has a heavy daily drug intake and the side effects worry her. Campbell Stewart, a self employed plumber, has chronic asthma, he's had asthma for five years and it's not getting any better. The third patient, was to be a seventeen year old asthmatic girl.

The course took place in an Edinburgh hotel, over an intensive five days lead by Sacha Stalmatski, one of Buteyko's disciples. Sacha teaches the Buteyko method with absolute conviction and has no time for doubters.

While he advocates the use of steroids, he dismisses the use of drugs to open the bronchial tubes because although they may provide temporary relief, he says they do not tackle the root of the problem. Ultimately he claims that people who stick to Buteyko need fewer drugs.

As the key to the treatment is breathing less, Sacha soon started teaching the class how to extend the time they hold their breath. It was hard work for everyone and the exercises didn't end in class. At night, they had to tape up their mouths to ensure they only breathed through their noses.

At the end of day one, Professor MacNee remained unconvinced, as did the patients, who found Sacha too dictatorial. By day three, the seventeen year old girl had dropped out and was replaced by another volunteer, Alexis Giboin, a fifteen year old asthmatic. Professor MacNee was becoming increasingly uneasy about how the course was progressing, Donna had had two nights without sleep and felt dreadful. But Campbell was starting to do well. He was lengthening his pause between breaths and reducing his air intake and Alexis soon followed suit. By the end of the day, Donna had also made progress and left for the evening wheeze free.



On the fifth and final day, Donna came in after a night out, she hadn't coughed during the night and she felt great. Alexis, whose asthma had just kept her off school for over a week, was better and Campbell was also impressed "The improvement's been phenomenal." Although Professor MacNee could not deny the improvements, he remained sceptical. Sacha remained adamant.

The only scientific trial into the method outside Russia was done in Brisbane, Australia in 1994 under Professor Charles Mitchell. Although the patients felt better, Professor Mitchell was still not convinced. Objective tests like breathing capacity showed no evidence of improvement. But Tess Graham, the physiotherapist who lead the Buteyko group, believes lung function tests aren't good indicators because they involve hyperventilating and can produce asthmatic symptoms. Other evidence from the trial was more favourable to the Buteyko method. After three months, the Buteyko group showed a 90% reduction in the use of bronchodilator drugs and 49% reduction in steroids. The non-Buteyko group made no progress.

The trial has not been published and there are no plans to fund any further Australian studies on the Buteyko method. Although Professor Mitchell feels that he has done what he can with Buteyko, he also feels that it deserves further research.

In Britain the Buteyko method is offered mainly by private clinics, but a GP in Glasgow, Dr Gerald Spence, has tried it out in his practice, alongside the more expensive conventional treatments.

Eighteen months later, he is pleased with the results. "It's so effective that they (patients) are able to reduce their medication and they seem quite comfortable and quite happy about this, and their asthma seems to be under good control."

Buteyko still has some way to go to make its case. Scientific trials are needed, but although the NHS spends hundreds of millions of pounds each year on asthma drugs, there are no plans to investigate Buteyko.

Dr Spence has found that it could save us a lot of money, "In 34 patients, prior to Buteyko, they were costing £15000 a year for their asthma medication. After Buteyko they cost £5000."

The National Asthma Campaign say that they cannot comment on, or endorse a treatment that has not been subject to full clinical trials. They do intend to put aside money to investigate complementary medicines and it is possible that if they got the right proposal, they would fund an investigation of Buteyko.



Three months after the Buteyko course, Alexis and her mother are thrilled with the results. Doubtful at first, Alexis' mother has been converted to the treatment. Alexis had been on medication for asthma since the age of one or two, now she doesn't take any.

Campbell has been able to fulfil an old dream and is able to play golf again.

Donna has had ups and downs and has had a number of hospital admissions. However, she has recently had her first holiday for years. She wasn't looking for a miracle cure, just some help and that's exactly what she feels she's got.

For more information on the Buteyko Method in Australasia contact The Buteyko Institute of Breathing and Health Incorporated on:
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