

HEALTHY LIVING

Dealing with relentless pain

Doctor advocates mind-body connection to relieve aches

BY CAROLYN SUSMAN
Cox News Service

Stabbing. Gnawing. Burning. Severe pain can rip your life apart and make you pray for death. It can cripple you and slam you into a wheelchair. It can be the end of the spirit that infused you with joy and morph into the rot that grows unchecked in your soul.

Dr. Joan Barice never imagined that she would be wrestling with that kind of evil. Not when she was skydiving or mountain climbing, activities that could have ended badly and pitted her against that demon.

But she met the demon in a place she didn't expect — the Atlanta airport. She had been waiting to board a plane for war-ravaged Kosovo, Yugoslavia, in November 1999. There, this skilled doctor from Singer Island, Fla., with degrees from Stanford University and Harvard, planned to help ease pain and heal illness.

"We were boarding. I bent over, got my bag to board and completely lost my urine and lost 90 percent use of my legs," Barice said, recalling the incident with amazement. She had been fine until then, with no noticeable pain or impairment.

Her missionary friends said they would carry her aboard, but she figured she wouldn't be getting the best treatment in a place where she was to be the medical teacher for others.

Flown to Jacksonville, Fla., she was put in a hard brace that kept her spine from bending at all.

"I got back a lot of my control" with that rigid treatment, she said.

Barice found out that the vertebrae in her spine had moved and cut off the spinal cord. She still doesn't know why. Maybe it was her extreme physical lifestyle or just her family genes catching up with her. She said her family has had back problems of varying severity.

"I was told, 'You're going to have to have surgery, or you will be in a wheelchair with a catheter for the rest of your life.'"

The 9 1/2-hour surgery was grueling. Barice had a long and hard recovery, marked by a staph infection she had to fight off. She was in and out of a wheelchair and had to use a walker at times.

The X-ray she kept shows a line of pins and hardware down her back that looks like she should be permanently upright.

"From then on, I was in serious pain all the time," she said.

But she continued to fight. "I did everything medical (that was recommended). I wanted to get back to work. I did physical therapy with a vengeance. I took the meds they put me on. But it wracked my brain. I need my brain. I had trouble functioning for nearly 10 months after that."

Barice was loaded up on anticonvulsants, antidepressants and heavy-duty painkillers. Disabled, she was forced to retire from her medical practice in 2000, but she kept her medical license current so she could still use her doctor skills, even as a volunteer.

"I was in a heck of a state. I just really hadn't planned for this," Barice said. "I can't sleep. I can't use my brain. So I stopped all the medications. I was in a lot of pain but able to get out."

Accomplished in field

This was a woman who not only had been physically active, but had practiced medicine both in private practice and as a missionary for her church. She had taught other doctors; she had studied acupuncture in China and was learning both the Chinese and American versions. (Americans use the Eastern practice mostly as a last resort, she says. Chinese use it as a first-line treatment and for many more conditions.)

She had specialized in addiction medicine, treating people who wanted to stop pain without drugs. Over the years, she had seen many addicted patients who wanted alternatives. She wasn't against drugs for pain for herself; she was just looking for something that would allow her to refog her mind.

So when she dropped the prescription medicines, she began doing acupuncture on herself and using over-the-counter drugs such as Tylenol.

"Until September 2006, I couldn't go beyond noontime. But during that half-day, I did volunteer medical work, taught doctors and medical students," Barice said. "But by noontime, the pain wore me down. I was feeling burning and severe pain if you even touched the area of the surgery. Deep, hard, gnawing pain. On a good day, it was a 6 out of 10, with 10 being the worst."

"I did limited exercise. If I didn't move, I would be disabled. But I functioned and I have gotten an awful lot done in the last seven years," she said.

Many know what Barice is fighting. Everyone has experienced pain in some form. Reports, studies and articles continue to grow on the subject and on the way scientists are trying to refine how to deal with it and how it works.

Barice discovered several methods on her own, some of which may work for others, some of which are well-documented in scans of the brain and cover stories in popular publications.

"The New War on Pain" was recently featured in Newsweek magazine.

"Chronic pain (such as what Barice experiences) is one of the most pervasive and intractable medical conditions in the U.S.," the article said, "with one in five Americans afflicted."

Front lines

The story focuses on Veterans Affairs and dealing with soldiers' pain. Barice, coincidentally, opened a pain-management and acupuncture clinic at the Palm Beach County (Fla.) VA Medical Center several years ago.

Prevention magazine also recently featured an article on "Nature's Ultimate Pain Killer," the mind.

What you're thinking and feeling, the article said, can affect the state of your pain and your perception of it.

Barice is well-acquainted with this mind-body connection. She had an "aha!" moment



CYDNEY SCOTT/COX NEWS SERVICE

Joan Barice led an extremely active lifestyle, which might have contributed to her spinal difficulties. But when they occurred, her quality of life changed seemingly forever.

she vividly recalls. Even being a longtime meditator, she said this recognition was stunning and empowering for her. It happened in 2005, she said, when she already was practicing acupuncture and applying essential oils that she says have worked amazingly well in concert with her other techniques to relieve pain.

"By reaching the end of my rope, I've learned how to deal with it. I just looked up to God and said, 'Help,' and I felt a kind of peace and quiet," she said.

"I realized that reacting and getting emotional about it is making it worse. What can I do? Back brace, hot pack, Tylenol. I'm still left with pain. It feels like it's sharp, gnawing, aching."

"Objectively, without judging it, I started checking out what the pains were and accepting it. That worked, and the pain was so much less very quickly."

Barice said surrendering her pain lessened its power over her.

"Focus on your pain. Accept it, let it go. But don't emotionalize. That was a turning point for me," she said. "You can make your pain so much worse if you're afraid of it, if you're the victim. I've always meditated. But I wanted to get rid of the pain, it was so bad."

She could have been quoting directly from the Prevention article. That's because mind over matter, or whatever you want to call the approach, is gaining increasing recognition and acceptance.

"Expectations about pain can be self-fulfilling," the Prevention article said. "If you think it will be bad, it will be bad, and you might even feel worse than you should."

Studies at Wake Forest University School of Medicine proved this: "Your attitude affects how bad you'll feel."

These positive thoughts, coupled with the essential oils and Chinese berries Barice swears by (find more information at www.youngliving.org/ejoanbaricemd) have helped her move on since her 1999 back injury.

She knows that much of the Western

world, and the world of medicine, disregard or refuse to accept the alternatives she has long employed. But that doesn't stop her. She is hoping to set up scientific trials of the berries and oils she uses, perhaps through the University of Miami School of Medicine, where she is a voluntary assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral science, or at Florida Atlantic University, where she also is an affiliate clinical assistant professor of biomedical science.

"Yes, we need more research," she said. "Doctors have to be convinced. I've done my own comparisons, and essential oils gave me back a life allowing me to use my brain."

"A lot of things we don't know about, but the importance of the mind-body connection is profound. Thinking can make you sick, and thinking can make you well."

"It does appear, for me, the oils and berry juice are safe and effective in controlling my pain."

Mind managing pain

Barice's condition is by no means gone: In fact, her doctor is recommending more surgery. But the pain has diminished for her.

"I tell everybody not to stop their medicines and to get their doctors' OK to use it (the berry drink called Ningxia juice) if they are under treatment."

"We don't have cures or satisfactory treatments so far for a lot of these chronic conditions," she said. "I definitely believe and can feel it helping me, even though my spine is getting worse and some symptoms have progressed. I have more energy, and it helps decrease the pain so I can function better — that's not a small thing!"

Barice isn't giving up. "If something is treatable, the mind-body connection is the most important thing. I could fold up and be the pain-suffering patient, but I really don't want to do that and I've decided I will do everything I can do to help with my pain." ■



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