

The Shoulder After A Terrible Accident

A Case Study

Robert Wu, O.M.D., Ph.D., L.Ac

As usual, the clinic door opens at 6:30am for another busy day. As soon as the door open, our old patients rush in to occupy all our treatment table fearing a long waiting time, even though they know I can't see of them immediately. This kind of unruly behavior can only be seen in Chinese Medicine Office. They just wouldn't obey our orders to line up and wait, so after a while, we are just numb to their behaviors. Only if the American can see this, I am pretty sure they will have a chuckle as to the difference in our culture.

May is our patient with sciatic pain. Due to all the labor work she had to do in the village and farmland, as time passed, she developed degenerative disc disease (Chinese commoners call it bone spur) which lead to the sciatic pain with radiation down to her thigh and lower leg. She had trouble walking before she seeks treatment with us. After 2 to 3 weeks of treatment, her symptoms became better and were stabilized. One night during treatment, she points to her shoulder suddenly, and ask me "Dr. Wu, do you treat shoulder pain?" I asked her "I thought you have leg pain only? What happened? Why now the pain moves to your shoulder?" And I begin to mumble to myself. May then explained to me she was asking on behalf of her neighbor.

May's neighbor Mr. Chan noticed May's sciatic pain condition was improving everyday. From not being able to walk or turn the body, to now being able to move freely and can work light duty in the field. So Mr. Chan asked May to enquire about his daughter shoulder condition.

Mr. Chan's daughter, Mei Wen is a 30-year-old female. She had an auto accident 2 months prior with a big truck. Mei Wen was riding her motorcycle at the time and was accidentally "brushed" by the big truck. Mei Wen's motorcycle when underneath the truck but she escaped without serious injuries. She was release from the hospital after x-ray, with a diagnosis of superficial abrasion injury.

While Mei Wen was in the hospital, she was complaining about having right shoulder pain. The medical doctor on duty at the time came to see her a few times. He stated coldly that all Mei Wen has to do was to take some pain pills for a few times and it is not such a big deal. Then he left without doing anything else. Ever since Mei

Wen was released from the hospital, her right shoulder pain has not decrease, and that lead to May's inquiry.

When I first met Mei Wen she look decidedly unhappy. Her father answered all the questions I posted and Mei Wen sat without a single word. I was thinking she might be a mute. I then asked her father if Mei Wen had hurt her eardrum during the accident and was that the reason she wouldn't respond to my questioning. Her father told me Mei Wen was mad for she has such obvious and terrible shoulder pain. She couldn't even move any one of her finger but the medical doctor told her she was well and just needed to rest for a few days. However, her shoulder condition had gotten worse in these two months. That's why Mei Wen lost her trust in any doctor and refuses to talk to any of them.

So I decided we couldn't really blame Mei Wen's attitude, I would have open my mouth and yelled at those medical doctor myself. I then proceed to look at her x-ray and discovered a 2 cm dislocation in her right shoulder joint. I thought either this medical doctor must be blind or just passing his time in the hospital for missing such obvious injury. However, since two months had passed the muscles in her right shoulder are all atrophied. Even if we put her shoulder back in place, the surrounding muscles will not be able to support the shoulder and another dislocation will be imminent. Our first priority would be to have the muscles to have muscular force and elasticity, as well as have the atrophic muscles to regain their size by having enough blood circulation in the area, in order to recover their function and feeling.

But all these are easier to say than do. My first thought was using electrical muscle stimulation to involuntarily moving the muscles, to awaken the injured nervous system, to strengthen and to retrain the movement in the area, so the patient can perform these functions voluntarily in later days.

As soon as I turn on the electric stimulation machine right after proper pads placement, with very light electric current of miliampere/equivalent to one-thousandth ampere (household electric voltage is 100 watts, unit for current is ampere), Mei Wen let out a horrible scream. It caused such a stir that all other clinical workers rushed in to find out what was going on. She has actually frightened and I was in my own cold sweat, I then ask her what was wrong. She answered mildly that it was very painful.

My mind drew a blank as I was wondering what caused her so much pain. The normal sensation with the electrical stimulation will liken some ants crawling over your superficial skin. I always know how much amperage I give to my patients. I then

turn off the machine in order to comfort Mei Wen. Then I place the pads to a different location to her shoulder and turn on the machine. Just as last time, Mei Wen let out another horrible scream. This time, Mei Wen father told her nicely to try to tolerate the pain, and that her scream might affect the clinic's business. He coached her patiently with love, "My child, try to control it a little, tolerate it a little, ok?" Mei Wen replied, "I tried really hard to tolerate it, why don't you try it? Then you will know."

Then the assistant nurse came and told me 3 new patients left after they heard the horrible screams. Now I realized why the father tried to calm her down in order not to scare away my new patients. However, I didn't turn off the machine this time when Mei Wen screams, but instead I was trying to observe her pain tolerance and adjust the electric current. Strangely enough, after 3 minutes Mei Wen no longer screams. I can see her shoulder muscle groups twitch continuously.

After this strange and busy day, I went home and think about this case for all night. I stayed up to do research on information that is relevant to this shoulder dislocation and atrophy case. Then I found it! It is said that the nervous system's sensitivity is highly increased around the muscle atrophy area. Therefore when the area encounters an external stimulus, the nervous system sensitivity will react higher than normal or even over reacts. However, if we keep up with the stimulation in the area, the pain sensation conducted by the nervous system to the brain will decrease, then the sensation will change to numbness and pain will no longer be felt.

So I finally figured out the reasons for Mei Wen's horrible screams and subsequent stoppage of pain. I now schedule Mei Wen's appointment after dinnertime, so as to not scare away my new patients. This is because whenever we change electrical stimulation location on her shoulder, she will still let out this horrible scream for about 3 minutes. Of course, as she came for more treatments, this screaming reaction became less frequent.

Acupuncture and electrical stimulation treatments lasted about three and a half months. Also, shoulder brace for support 24 hours a day to stabilize the shoulder joint. After the first month, her right fingers began to have movements. After the second month, she was able to move her forearm and elbow. On the third month of treatment, Mei Wen suddenly told me one day, "Dr. Wu, I can move my shoulder!" She then proceeds to swing her arm and shoulder in a windmill fashion, circumducting in a circular motion. Of course, then I understand she has truly recovered. But who is

going to compensate the 10 new patients she scared away (joking)? I heard that she went back to the factory to work as a machinist, and doing good work with her skillful hands. I was happy to learn that she also got married...