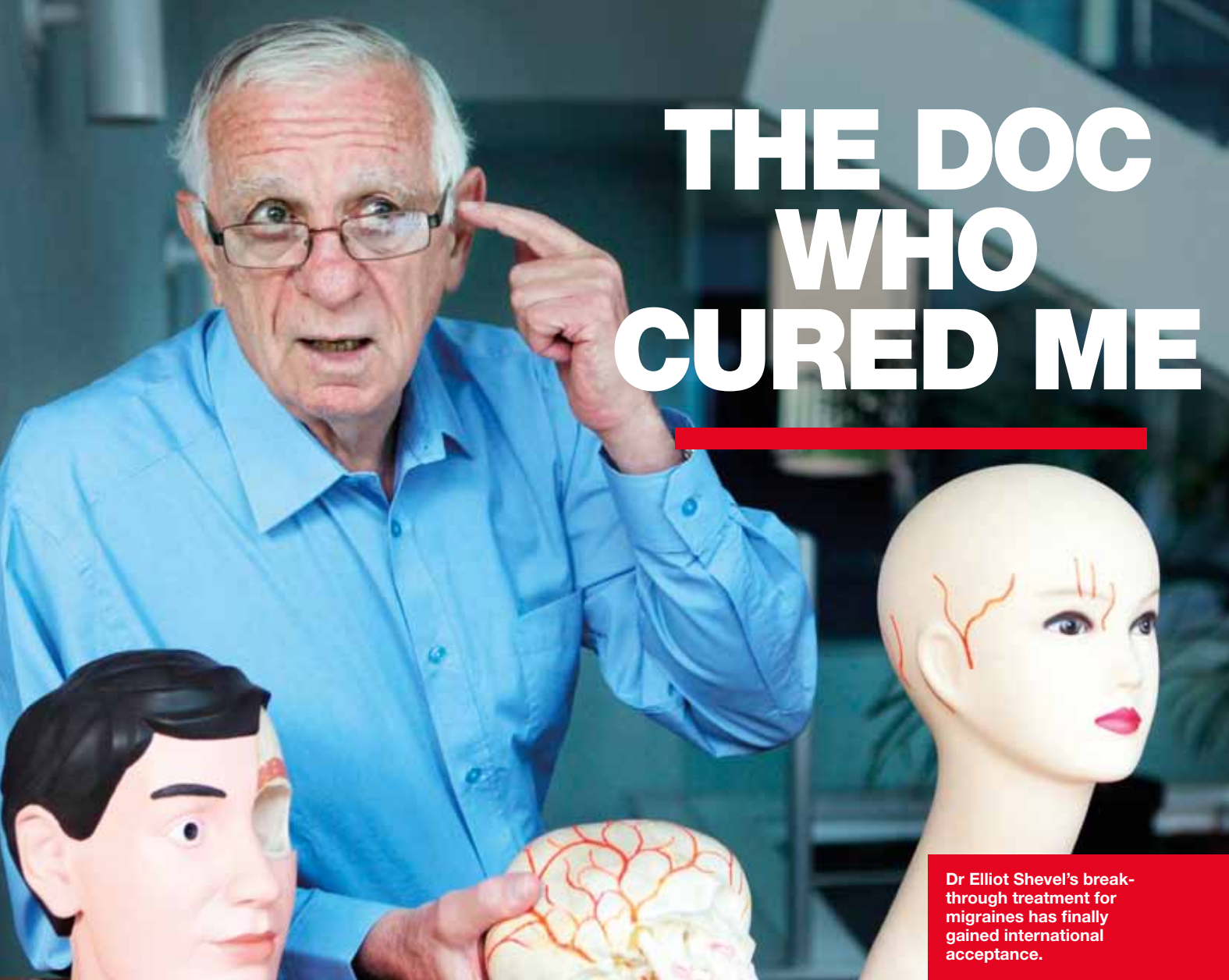


THE DOC WHO CURED ME



Dr Elliot Shevel's breakthrough treatment for migraines has finally gained international acceptance.

Megan Miller's migraines have vanished thanks to treatment by SA's Dr Elliot Shevel – and his work is being recognised globally

By HAIDEE MULLER

IF YOU suffer frequently from those pounding headaches that really spoil your day you'll know how easily they can drive you to the strongest painkillers on the market.

YOU photographer Megan Miller knows all about that kind of discomfort. Every day for almost three years she endured headaches and later agonising migraines.

"My head throbbed; I felt sick and I couldn't see properly," she recalls. "It made it difficult for me to do my job. I took all kinds of pills but they provided only temporary relief."

So Megan was more than happy to be examined and treated by a South African doctor who had a very different approach to

treating migraine sufferers.

Instead of prescribing painkillers Dr Elliot Shevel, a Johannesburg-based maxillo-facial surgeon, offers two other options. One is an oral plate that relaxes the jaw and neck muscles; the other a simple surgical procedure that blocks pain by cauterising or cutting surface blood vessels in the scalp (YOU, 21 February 2008).

After several years he's finally being recognised worldwide for his procedures.

By August 2009 Megan (30) was afflicted by headaches almost daily. "It just got worse," she recalls. "I went to my GP who referred me to a neurologist."

Her dad, Tommy Williams, died of brain cancer 10 years ago aged 59. "Fortunately

various scans showed I had no brain tumours."

But the headaches persisted. Megan consulted an ear, nose and throat specialist, had acupuncture administered by a physiotherapist and tried medication for her sinus problem. But nothing helped.

Early last year migraine attacks were diagnosed. So by the time Dr Shevel examined her in April this year she was desperate.

He recommended she use an oral plate. "It's fitted against your palate," Megan explains. "You have to remove it when you eat or drink but you can sleep with it in your mouth. It felt strange at first but it certainly lessened the migraine attacks."

On 20 June she also underwent the blood

vessel surgery recommended by Dr Shevel.

"Before the operation they did tests, including a CAT scan, so the doctor would know just where to cut and how many blood vessels were involved." It varies from one to eight.

The procedure in the operating theatre takes between 30 and 90 minutes, depending on the number of blood vessels that have to be treated. In Megan's case this was eight – "three on either side of my head and two behind".

"It was all over so quickly. The only difficulty was that the incisions were sensitive and sore afterwards," she recalls. "But when those stitches were removed after two weeks I was a new person!"

She still uses the oral plate. "It's for the muscle pain because I carry heavy photographic equipment and often have a stiff neck and shoulders.

"Occasionally I still have a light headache but certainly not migraines. The best thing is that thanks to the operation I can live again and even listen to loud music."

THE surgery that changed Megan's life is "one of the first realistic alternatives to daily medication", Dr Shevel says at the Cape Town branch of his Headache Clinic in Goodwood. "Here we don't like pills."

Specialists have long believed migraines start in the brain and there's no muscle component involved. "Yet I've been saying for almost 20 years migraines don't start in the brain," he says firmly.

His discovery of the true cause of migraines was coincidental, he says, when he was about to perform mouth surgery on a patient who then complained of a headache.

"I noticed a pulsing blood vessel on the side of her head. When I pressed on it the pain disappeared; when I took my finger away it returned. I realised the blood vessel was the cause of the pain."

The blood vessels involved in a migraine are often surface vessels in the temples or smaller vein structures in the head and scalp, he says, and not the blood vessels in the brain, as doctors had long believed.

Dr Shevel, who's chairman of the SA section of the International Headache Society, hasn't been afraid to debate his theories about migraines with leading neurologists around the world. Earlier this year he won a debate with the world's top migraine specialists at the World Congress on Controversies in Neurology in Austria. His treatment procedures are now accepted internationally.



LEFT: Dr Shevel examines Megan Miller at The Headache Clinic. ABOVE: Shortly after the op which has left her migraine free. She still has the occasional headache.

'The medical community clung to incorrect beliefs without any evidence'

"Can you imagine how excited this makes me?" he says. "For almost a century the medical and scientific community blindly clung to incorrect beliefs without any evidence."

That's why medication developed for migraines doesn't really work, he says. "It's specifically developed to work on blood vessels in the brain, but now there's proof they aren't the cause of migraines."

A recent study by a Dutch neurologist supports Dr Shevel's long-held theory. Dr GG Schoonman of Leiden University used a hi-tech scanner to measure blood vessels and found during a migraine, blood vessels in the brain didn't behave as had been accepted for many years. His findings were published in Britain in neurology magazine Brain.

As a result the International Headache Society's classification of a migraine has to be adapted, Dr Shevel says. For more than three decades it was based on symptoms such as a throbbing headache or a headache on only one side of the head, nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light and sound.

At the Headache Clinic, started by Dr Shevel in 1992, migraine sufferers are treated with his pioneering cauterisation procedure. It's based on research he conducted with Professor EH Spierings, a neurologist at Harvard University in America, and Italian migraine specialist Professor Carlo

Chanketti. Their results were published in Therapy, a British medical magazine.

Surface blood vessels in the scalp were cauterised in 55 migraine sufferers. After 12 months all said their quality of life had improved dramatically.

Although headaches often come from blood vessels they're also caused by muscle tension. As part of their treatment at Dr Shevel's clinic migraine sufferers are given the oral plate, known as a Posture Modifying Appliance (PMA)

"It makes the neck and jaw muscles relax," he says. "It doesn't affect your speech and isn't a bother. And it brings real relief."

In acute cases migraine sufferers also undergo cauterisation of problem blood vessels, which are cut or burnt.

"The operation is simple, exceedingly safe and is performed in a day clinic," Dr Shevel says. "It permanently relieves the pain in blood vessels in the scalp. Those blood vessels aren't necessary for normal functioning, and after the operation you won't have to take pills again."

He claims a success rate of more than 85 per cent and headache specialists around the world are taking a greater interest in his technique.

● **The Headache Clinic has branches in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. For more information go to headache-clinic.co.za or call 0861 678 911. ■**