

## Howson backs electric heroin cure

"It cures all sorts of obsessive, illnesses. That's an incredible thing for sufferers to have"

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WRACKED by his addiction to drugs, his career as Scotland's best known modern painter seemed to be on the verge of collapse.

But now - cured and renewed - Peter Howson is throwing his weight behind a revolutionary trial of a new 'miracle' electric therapy cure for addicts which could bring about the biggest breakthrough in the war on drugs for a generation.

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Sunday has learnt that Howson is funding a remarkable trial, to take place next month, which promises to get some of Scotland's most hardened addicts permanently clean - within a month - without the need for drug replacement.

The therapy, known as Neuro-Electric Therapy, or NET, was pioneered by award-winning Scottish surgeon Dr Margaret Patterson, who, in the early Seventies, discovered that low pulses of electricity prevented the acute pains suffered by addicts during cold turkey.

It is claimed that the pulses trigger the brain to release endorphins, the body's natural painkillers, which are often dulled through addiction.

The treatment was used on celebrities such as Eric Clapton and Keith Richards in the early Seventies but has never been taken up by the NHS. Dr Patterson died in 2002 without seeing her discovery applied more widely to treat addicts.

However, Howson has now come forward to fund next month's trial, which, if successful, could force ministers and health chiefs to finally offer their backing.

Until now, Dr Patterson's supporters say the treatment has been deliberately blocked by Scotland's "conservative" medical establishment, who have preferred to use chemical treatments such as methadone.

But with one recent report suggesting that only 3% of methadone users actually stop using drugs, ministers are now under great pressure to find an alternative.

Next month's trial will take place at a farmhouse in an undisclosed location in central Scotland where six men and six women will be housed. Half are addicted to heroin, while others will have addictions to cocaine, tobacco and alcohol. After a final 'fix', they will begin to receive treatment. NET is administered through self-adhesive electrodes which are attached behind the ear. A pocket-sized stimulator is used continuously for six to 10 days and pulses an electric current through the brain.

The entire trial will be filmed by a TV documentary crew and observed by Professor Neil McKeganey, the director of Glasgow University's Centre for Drugs Misuse Research.

Critics have previously warned not to expect NET to be a "magic bullet", pointing out that it can only help soften cravings, and not the addiction itself.

However, supporters believe the trial could revolutionise drug treatment in Scotland.

Howson said: "What's so remarkable is that it cures all sorts of obsessive, addictive illnesses. That's an incredible thing for sufferers and addicts to have. It is important for people to know that they can be cured and that they do not need to have a lifelong relationship with methadone to survive. This will make a massive difference to addicts who are so often caught in a desperate situation."

He added: "Of course, there is a fight ahead, but we are convinced it works. We have had positive responses from those involved in government and from the addicts. The hope would be that eventually it could be used in prisons and that the benefits could be felt on a far wider scale. I think that it will be revolutionary."

George Patterson, Dr Patterson's widower, added: "It was always her desire that she could start it in the country of her birth and then take it from there. If this comes off, then she would have been very pleased."

He added: "It is almost 30 years since my wife treated Eric Clapton and Keith Richards. They are there carrying on their careers. The benefits have been known about in other countries for a long, long time, but it has been blocked here by the pharmaceutical companies doctors and mealy-mouthed politicians."

Professor McKeganey added: "We have a treatment in methadone which we know is associated with dozens and dozens of deaths. No one has died with NET. I think there is a moral obligation to explore this and I have said I will see if it is real or not."

He added: "It is intolerable that we have things like this which may work and may be beneficial but which are such a struggle to see through."

Justice minister Cathy Jamieson has asked her officials to study the treatment and is awaiting the verdict of next month's trial.

However, opposition politicians said that ministers had dragged their feet for too long.

Scots Tory leader Annabel Goldie said: "I am delighted to hear that the voluntary and charitable sector is making progress where the Executive has proven so stubborn and unyielding.

"I would urge the Executive to co-operate with these people and assist with funding. We need to explore every possible option to deal with the massive problem of drugs in Scotland."

Norman Stone, an independent filmmaker who first made a programme about NET 30 years ago, and is filming the trial next month, added: "I thought 31 years ago that it would be established. But it has stayed in the long grass. Jack McConnell and [chief medical officer] Harry Burns say they are interested, but it is getting stymied by the people beneath them. That can't happen for much longer."

#### **The Scottish pioneer of NET**

NEURO-ELECTRIC therapy, or NET, was pioneered by the late Dr Meg Patterson, one of Scotland's most renowned medics of the last 50 years.

Aged just 25, she was elected as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, the only woman among 100 other candidates. She began her career in newly independent India where, as a medical missionary, she set up community hospitals, which won her an MBE in 1961.

Moving to Hong Kong, she - along with neurosurgeons - drew on the techniques of acupuncture and discovered the ability of electronic pulses to significantly lessen the pain of opiate withdrawal.

Aged 50, she returned to Britain to further the technique, treating rock stars such as Eric Clapton and Keith Richards. Research suggests the treatment works by stimulating the production of endorphins in the brain, which greatly dulls the pain of withdrawal for hard drugs, tobacco and even alcohol. However, NET has been greeted with caution in Britain, and Patterson was forced to take the treatment across the world.

Patterson died in 2002 after returning to Scotland. Her work has now been taken up by her husband George Patterson and their son, Lorne Patterson, also an NET clinician, and is now being used in countries as far afield as Mexico and Romania.

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