

# Shock tactics in war on heroin addiction

Jason Allardyce

HEROIN addicts are to be offered a form of electric shock therapy to kick their addiction under a pilot project backed by Jack McConnell.

The technique — which helped musicians including Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, Pete Townshend and Boy George — uses an electrical current to combat the symptoms of going “cold turkey”.

Last week the first minister met supporters of the treatment in the wake of research suggesting it could be more effective than methadone. He has asked Harry Burns, his chief medical officer, to help the group secure Scottish executive funding for a pilot scheme to test neuro electric-therapy (Net) on a range of drug addicts.

If the trial is successful McConnell hopes the therapy, which was developed by a Scottish doctor, could be offered on the NHS. It involves using a tiny electric current to release endorphins, the body's natural painkillers, to fight withdrawal symptoms. The charge is delivered by a small metal box attached to the ears.

The process, which takes up to six days, has been recorded in a documentary being made by Norman Stone, the Bafta-winning director.

Stone filmed Barry, a 24-year-old from Kilmarnock who had failed repeatedly to come off heroin, undergoing the treatment. He has been clean since receiving the therapy in February.

Dr Margaret Patterson from Aberdeen developed Net, which is based on a form of electro-acupuncture, during the 1970s while working in Hong Kong.

The technique, which is followed up with rehabilitation support, is already being piloted in countries including America, Australia, Mexico and Romania. However, the trials have had mixed results.

In 1984 a pilot scheme set up by Patterson, who died in 2002, reported that 95% of patients using Net claimed they were free of craving and three-quarters said they were free of anxiety. Tests also indicate it can help smokers give up.

But trials in 1992 concluded that Net only offered a placebo effect and some have since dismissed it as having no scientific validity.

McConnell has invited supporters to apply for executive funding to assess the scheme.

Among those present at the meeting last Thursday was John Mullen, who set up the Third Step charity to rehabilitate addicts. “We were very encouraged that he took the time to see us for half an hour and listen to our case,” said Mullen. “At first when people hear about Net they think, ‘Wait a minute, you’re going to hook electricity to the side of someone’s brain. That sounds iffy.’”

“But when you see a 24-year-old who has tried four times without success to get off heroin get off it in five days you’ve got to take it seriously.”

Mullen added that the group was now looking for 15 volunteers to take part in a pilot scheme, which would cost just under £500,000.

“We got a positive response from the first minister but it could take another 18 months to get any public funding, so we are also looking at the possibility of private funding,” he said.

A source close to McConnell said anecdotal evidence had been impressive and a pilot scheme would show whether it was something that could be used in the NHS.

“Our chief medical officer will be giving them advice on the best type of trials to set up to hopefully maximise the chance of getting funding and support,” he said.

