

IDD Therapy Disc Treatment at Core Physiatry Warwick – doing more for long term disc patients.

By Dr Stefaan Vossen

At Core Physiatry in Warwick we have been providing IDD Therapy disc treatment since September 2014.

When we first became aware of IDD Therapy we were attracted to it because there is category of back pain sufferer who is traditionally hard to treat. Intervertebral discs are the spongy shock absorbers between the vertebrae bones in our spines, and patients with long term disc problems (such as 'slipped disc', herniated discs and related conditions like sciatica) have limited treatment options available to them.

At Core Physiatry we speak in terms of the 'what and why?' of a problem. When someone has a disc problem, their immediate issue is the pain they are feeling. We refer to that as the “what” of your problem. When you are in pain, the first priority is to reduce that pain - before we do that, you probably don't want to spend too much time thinking about why you are experiencing the pain. While we work on pain reduction, though, it's really important that we also work on the 'why' - why did your problem arise in the first place and what can be done about it.

This differentiates our approach and treatments from treatment that is purely focused on pain relief (injections or pain killers for examples).

It has become somewhat of a cliché amongst healthcare professionals in that we all seek to address the causes of the pain. This can be particularly challenging when it comes to disc problems, because the causes of these chronic presentations can be many and varied, and have typically built up over time. By the time these causes result in chronic disc conditions, they can be difficult to address with standard manual therapy techniques alone.

The most important thing for good spinal health and disc health is movement. Thus when there is muscle spasm and pain, we lose mobility in the spine. Then we have the infamous vicious circle of pain preventing us from moving and staying active, which stops the body having a chance to correct and heal itself.

So what are your treatment options for disc problems?

When it comes to treating discs, as clinicians we aim to restore movement in the spinal segments and then work on addressing the causes which led to the problem in the first place. That can be working to change posture, to restore muscle balance, releasing muscle tension and a variety of other interlinked problems.

Activity (to strengthen and restore functionality) and manual therapy can be beneficial, but for people with very painful disc problems or unstable discs, these approaches have their limits and risks. As manual therapists we can use our hands, but unlike other joints, the back is a much larger structure and very strong. To take pressure off discs and spinal structure for enough time and then restore movement

with our hands alone is a real challenge and part of the reason why chronic low back pain is such a big issue in health care.

The IDD Therapy disc treatment tool is a mechanical advancement which uses computer controlled pulling forces to open and mobilise targeted spinal segments where there is an injured disc. The IDD Therapy machine is a large piece of equipment which does not have a degree of familiarity about it because in the past, many clinicians used mechanical tools, notably traction, to treat back pain.

Traction as a treatment went out of vogue some time ago as it was not shown to be effective for treating back pain. IDD Therapy was developed in part to systematically address the failings of traction. The key difference between IDD Therapy and traction is the way the pulling forces are applied so that with IDD Therapy the treatment is comfortable for the duration of treatment and crucially the forces are applied at specific angles to treat targeted spinal segments rather than a non focused force applied along the spine which was typically the case with traction.

IDD Therapy allows clinicians to take pressure off the targeted disc and other spinal structures to relieve pain. With the added dimension of mobilisation and a soft tissue stretch component to relieve muscle spasm, IDD Therapy helps us to free movement in the spine and improve range of motion which is so vital.

What has been interesting for us is seeing patients who have been through the usual back pain treatment hoops. Most patients coming for IDD Therapy have been taking pain killers, they have visited their GP (often on several occasions), they have tried one or a variety of different hands on treatments and many are at the stage of seeing a Consultant, whether surgeon or pain specialist.

The outcomes for what has traditionally been a challenging category of back pain sufferer are highly encouraging and we will be conducting a full audit later in the year.

Returning to the what and the why of pain, with IDD Therapy we have a tool which enables us to deal more effectively with the pain in the here and now moment. As a multidisciplinary team, we then work together to address the other issues which may have led to the problem in the first place or which developed once the initial problem manifested.

Common to most disc issues are severe tightness in certain muscles, this can be the hips (hip flexors), hamstrings and buttocks (glutes). We can also observe that movement is impaired in one or more of the joints in the pelvis. We can also observe problems arising from the feet, ankles and knees.

Our bodies are balanced and where one part of movement becomes impaired, then another part of the body must adapt typically to take more of the "strain". e.g if we stand upright and bend one leg, the straightened leg (including knees ankles and feet) will have a force greater than 50% of our bodies weight exerted on it. This is not an issue in short periods but over time this added strain causes degeneration, weakness and strain on one side and weakness on the other.

With regards to the pelvis, if one of the pelvic joints has restricted movement the effect is to cause more rotation through the opposite joint and this exerts a greater force through the discs at the bottom of the spine during twisting movement than if all the joints of pelvis moved equally.

Therefore as part of the treatment programme, we have to identify and address these other issues, since if left untreated, the mechanisms which gave rise to the disc problem in the first place would be free to do their work again. By treating the other issues (causes) within the programme we therefore have a much greater chance of preventing injury recurrence.

The combination of IDD Therapy with other manual therapy interventions provides us with a complete programme of care for our disc patients and in particular those with long term problems. This is a significant development in the fight against back pain.

Having established our own IDD Therapy disc treatment service as part of a UK network of providers, we now work closely with local neurosurgeons who wish to provide better non-invasive treatment options for patients whose conditions are not in need of immediate surgical intervention.

For more details about IDD Therapy Disc Treatment contact us on 01926 801111 or email helpme@tcpn.co.uk