

Treating IBS with hypnotherapy, University of Manchester, UK

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Medics at The University of Manchester have discovered a way to treat Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) using hypnotherapy.

Up to eight million people in Britain suffer from IBS, with symptoms including diarrhoea, pain and bloating. The condition can seriously affect sufferers' quality of life and finding treatment can be difficult, leading many doctors to feel they can do little to help.

Research by Peter Whorwell, Professor of Medicine and Gastroenterology in the University's Medical School and Director of the South Manchester Functional Bowel Service, has been researching the use of gut-directed hypnosis for over 20 years. Most recently, two hundred and fifty patients who have suffered from IBS for over two years were given twelve one-hour sessions, during which they were given an explanation of how the gut works and what causes their symptoms.

"IBS is ideal for treatment with hypnosis, as there is no structural damage to the body," explained Professor Whorwell. "During the hypnotherapy, sufferers learn how to influence and gain control of their gut function, and then seem to be able to change the way the brain modulates their gut activity."

With a success-rate of about 70% Professor Whorwell believes that, although labour-intensive, hypnotherapy could be an extremely effective treatment for the condition; and a less expensive alternative to new, costly drugs coming onto the market.

"We've found it to help all the symptoms, whereas some of the drugs available reduce only a few," he said. "As IBS can be a life-long condition it could clearly be a very valuable option for patients; however it is not suitable for everyone and women tend to respond better than men."

Professor Whorwell has founded a dedicated unit at Wythenshawe Hospital which treats patients from all over the UK, as the treatment can only be carried out by a practitioner trained in gut-directed hypnotherapy and is not yet widely available on the NHS.

Former patient Sonia Pinnock said, "I suffered from IBS and was on medication for nearly 20 years, but could get little relief from my symptoms. Since visiting the clinic for 12 hypnotherapy sessions last year however they've disappeared completely - the difference it's made to my quality of life is indescribable."

Another happy patient Christine Walsh continued, "After my hysterectomy I suffered from IBS for about five years, and it totally ruined my quality of life. I couldn't plan holidays or leisure activities and at work I was often doubled-up in pain. But since having weekly hypnotherapy sessions for three months I've now been free from IBS for five and a half years - the treatment has totally changed my life."

Professor Whorwell concludes, "The term hypnosis was coined by a Manchester surgeon, James Braid, early in the nineteenth century, and it's been in and out of fashion ever since. I'd like to think that our Unit has brought hypnotherapy back to Manchester, and helped improve its legitimacy."

Professor Whorwell will be discussing hypnotherapy and IBS at one of the University's Caf  Scientifique discussion evenings on 3 October at 6:30pm; please visit www.cafescientifique.manchester.ac.uk for more details. The event is open to all (places must be booked) and will be held in Cafe Muse at The Manchester Museum on Oxford Road.

Prof Whorwell, Sonia Pinnock and Christine Walsh are available for interview upon request.

Peter Whorwell graduated in biochemistry from the University of London and medicine from Guy's Hospital, London. After a series of residencies and fellowships, he was appointed as Consultant Physician and Gastroenterologist at the University Hospital of South Manchester in 1981 and subsequently promoted to Professor of Medicine and Gastroenterology.

He has a particular interest in the functional gastrointestinal disorders and now directs the South Manchester Functional Bowel Service, which undertakes research into the clinical, epidemiological and pathophysiological aspects of gastrointestinal disorders as well as caring for large numbers of these patients from all over the UK. It also undertakes a wide-ranging programme of research into new treatment options for these conditions including pharmacological, dietary and behavioural approaches.

The University of Manchester (manchester.ac.uk) was formed by the merger of The Victoria University of Manchester and UMIST in October 2004, and with 36 000 students expected in the coming academic year is the largest higher education institution in the country. Its Faculty of Medical & Human Sciences (mhs.manchester.ac.uk) is one of the largest faculties of clinical and health sciences in Europe, with a research income of over £37 million.

The School of Medicine (medicine.manchester.ac.uk) is the largest of the Faculty's five Schools, with 1300 staff, almost 2000 undergraduates and a £32M research income. The School encompasses five teaching hospitals, and is closely linked to a range of general hospitals and community practices across the North West of England.

Jo Nightingale on 0161 275 8156
joanne.nightingale@manchester.ac.uk
University of Manchester
<http://www.manchester.ac.uk>

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