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The Lost Art 康 of GUA SHA 健

by Corinna McFarlane, DTCM, Dipl. O.M., NCCAOM . Jeff McMackin, DTCM, D.Ac., D.C.H.

Gua Sha is a healing technique used throughout Asia, and a component of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). "Gua" means to rub or cause friction and "sha" is the term used to describe the reddening of the skin (due to the congestion of blood) that occurs as a result of this friction.

To perform Gua Sha the practitioner first applies a Chinese medicated liniment or oil to the affected area. Then, with a round-edged instrument friction is applied to the skin surface in repeated, even, gentle strokes. Traditionally these tools are made of buffalo horn or jade. The friction causes the sha (or redness) to surface, and in minutes it fades and then disappears totally in two to four days. The colour and rate of fading are indicative of the acuteness of the condition.

The benefits of Gua Sha are numerous. It moves "stuck" blood, promoting normal circulation to the muscles, tissues, and organs directly beneath the area being treated. The patient experiences immediate relief of stiffness, pain and mobility as surface and muscular tension are released. Normal metabolic processes are restored by the movement of fluids as nutrients are carried to the tissues and metabolic wastes are carried away.

Gua Sha is a versatile treatment technique. Because it mimics sweating, it is effective against colds and flus. It cools the patient who is overheated, but it will also warm the patient who is chilled.

An acupuncturist considers the use of Gua Sha in any case of pain or discomfort, as well as for upper respiratory and digestive problems. It is very effective in the treatment of frozen shoulder, lower back pain, sciatica, tendonitis, whip lash, osteoarthritis of the neck, and menstrual pain.

Traditionally Gua Sha is used by both Chinese medical physicians and lay people alike. For example, if a family member caught a chill or was "coming down with something" Gua Sha would be used immediately. Historically, widows in the villages would perform Gua Sha to earn money. Today, Asians who have immigrated to North America continue to practice Gua Sha as part of their family medicine, and TCM practitioners consider it an essential part of their treatments.



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