



## Cupping, A Complementary Modality for Massage Therapists

by Sam Mendonca '17



In 2008 the global public was introduced to the notion of cupping through images of Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps sporting “purple circles” on his shoulders and back. Manual therapists are becoming more familiar with this modality, which is increasingly being used by massage therapists. But what exactly is cupping, and how can it add value to our practice?

Cupping, as the name suggests, involves the use of vacuum cups on a patient’s skin in order to achieve various outcomes. The modality is an ancient Chinese therapy based on the belief that certain health problems can be caused by stagnant blood and a poor energy flow through the body. David Schroevalier, RMT, RAc has been practicing massage therapy and cupping for 20 years, and has been teaching the modality since 2004. According to David, cupping is a relatively easy and effective modality to incorporate into one’s clinical practice. He describes cupping as unique in its ability to “pull apart” tissue (instead of compressing it) and to separate the superficial fascial layers between skin and muscle tissue. Cupping can affect interstitial fluid between fascial layers to increase glide faster than massage techniques, which is one of the reasons why David likes to incorporate the modality into his treatments.

Many massage therapists may feel nervous about leaving their patients “bruised” post-treatment. David explains this discolouration of the skin as a result of the collapse of blood capillary beds, which then induces a healing response. It is not actually bruising, therefore while leaving these discolourations on one’s patient is not the goal, it is one of the outcomes. The healthier the tissue, the less likely it is to discolour / the less intense the discolouration.

David has seen much success with the use of cupping alongside his massage treatments. In particular, repetitive strain injuries, where the tissue is undergoing a state of chronic inflammation, have responded quickly to cupping. David has also seen effectiveness in mobilizing scar tissue; he recounts an instance where a patient’s mastectomy scar of 20 years became more pliable and the range of motion increased notably with one cupping treatment.



Other RMTs who have used cupping in their practice also note its effectiveness. Judy Peleck '17 attended a two-day workshop upon entry to practice, and has been using the modality regularly. Like David, Judy finds cupping particularly successful for repetitive strain injuries. In one instance, her patient with lateral epicondylitis, who seemed to be getting little relief from massage alone, reported a significant decrease in pain after two cupping treatments.

Cupping might not appeal to all patients, and may not be indicated for all cases. However, this modality has been shown to be an effective way to alleviate discomfort and pain, increase pliability and reduce tissue limitations in many patients.

*David Schroevalier teaches a one-day cupping course that is a regular in S-C's line-up of continuing education courses. The next offering of this course is on April 27<sup>th</sup>. Please check our website for more information on how to register!*

#### **FYI:**

Traditional Chinese cupping involves the use of fire, where a flammable substance inside the cup is set on fire and the cup is placed on the patient's skin to create the vacuum effect. The more modern version referred to in this article uses plastic cups and a pump or silicone cups with a seal to produce the vacuum.