Case Study: Rhythmical Massage Therapy for Crohn’s Disease
by Orla Liddy

I am a 30 year-old trainee architect and have recently completed my post-graduate degree course. Whilst studying I have been living with my parents in Northern Ireland. At 15 I was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, a potentially life-threatening condition which affects the bowel, causing extreme inflammation and pain, and bringing a variety of complications.

Crohn’s Disease
Crohn’s disease affects between 30,000 and 60,000 people in the UK, with over 3,000 new sufferers diagnosed every year. Crohn’s causes inflammation of the whole of the alimentary canal, from where food enters the mouth right through to where it leaves the body, top to tail. It often causes ulcers and scarring to the wall of the intestine. The most commonly affected sites are the lower part of the small intestine (the terminal ileum) and the large intestine. Common symptoms include abdominal pain, urgent diarrhoea, intestinal bleeding, fever, lethargy, fatigue and weight loss. Most people develop Crohn’s before they are 30; the peak age is 14-24.

Treatment can include surgery to remove inflamed or scarred sections of the bowel, and in severe cases a colostomy, which is sometimes reversed once the acute problem has improved. Antibacterial drugs and corticosteroids are sometimes prescribed, but these can cause unpleasant side-effects. Sufferers usually have to avoid foods which are very high in fibre as these are harder to digest and can irritate the digestive tract. Spicy food can also aggravate symptoms, as can stressful situations and anxiety.

My Condition
I was perhaps more affected by my final degree exams than I realized. As a youngster doing GCSEs and A Levels I had experienced similar relapses, and had resorted to hefty doses of steroids to ease the acute severity of symptoms. On-going treatment with steroids is not feasible as the drugs bring their own complications with long-term use. I am of slight built, only 5’4” and even at my ideal weight I am something of a sparrow at around eight stone. When Crohn’s flares up I am often closer to seven stone. By July 2004, shortly after my final exams, I was at the point of collapse.

If I managed to keep my food down, which was not always the case, the stomach cramps were completely incapacitating. Most food irritated my stomach to the point where I was regularly vomiting, losing weight, and not getting the vital nutrients I needed to improve my health. My mother was caring for me and had resorted to what I can only describe as baby food – bland purées. Although this stayed down, it caused terrific problems with peristalsis in my gut, as the colon prefers something more fibrous to grip on, resulting in excruciating cramps. I was also suffering badly from reflux from all the acid produced in an easily-irritated stomach, and this in turn caused chest pain. Cramping pains in my abdomen were undermining my quality of sleep, even waking me up in the night. The result was complete exhaustion.

I am no stranger to Complementary Medicine. My doctor in Northern Ireland practises Anthroposophic Medicine, and recommended that I travel to Park Attwood Clinic whichshares this same approach. My condition was so fragile that I was unable to fly over from Ireland on my own, so my mother accompanied me. To begin with, I was too weak for Rhythmical Massage Therapy, and so warming Hydrotherapy treatment was prescribed, to help me regain my strength. In illness the body often displays uneven warmth, with cold extremities, and is unable to keep an even temperature and effective circulation. With Crohn’s Disease there is often a furnace of warmth in the abdomen, due to the inflammation of the bowel, and poor peripheral circulation, for example cold feet and even chilblains. The massage therapist often opts for a treatment bath in these circumstances. This gently stimulates the circulation, and builds up the patient’s strength. The vast treatment bath at the Clinic is made of aromatic cedar, the lighting is subtle, and often therapeutic oils are added to the water and dispersed as a fine mist using a clever little device called a Jungebad Oil Dispersion Unit. This creates the perfect nurturing environment to relax and soothe the body and the senses.

Because of pain in my abdomen, I also get quite tense in my upper body, all hunched up, and this is compounded by sitting at a computer or working at my drawing board for hours. Sudden weight loss and weakness also has a hunching effect, and the feeling of vulnerability that illness and pain create can also change my posture – literally a caving-in effect and I end up like a little old lady! Massaging my upper body iron’s this out, like a deep unraveling.

During my post-grad exams this February my Crohn’s flared up again, and I made the decision to visit Park Attwood without delay. My last exam was on the Friday, and by Tuesday I was at Park Attwood for a top-up. I went sooner, before the Crohn’s had really got a grip, because I had complete confidence that they would be able to nip it in the bud at Park Attwood. Again, the Massage Therapist didn’t directly tackle the abdomen, but started on my back where the spine and musculature is protective. The gentle warming process filters through to where it is needed. There is a fantastic warmth distribution with Rhythmical Massage, even when the therapist is working on your feet.

Towards the end of this last visit, things were so improved that I was able to have my abdomen massaged, over the stomach and left-hand side of the colon but not on the right side where the iliac fossa is situated (where the small bowel joins the colon) which is particularly sensitive.

Rhythmical Massage – How it Works
Rhythmical massage therapy is a soft-tissue massage; there is little pressure or friction, and no pummelling. It was developed at a clinic in Switzerland in the 1920s by Dr Ita Wegman, a pioneering doctor schooled in Physiotherapy and Massage. After the famous Dr Margarethe Hauschka joined the clinic, she and Dr Wegman collaborated for 12 years to
develop this new approach to massage therapy. The technique is very specific, with the touch light, the hands lifting the tissue in gentle movements. The flat hand is rarely used. Movements are circling, sweeping, working with the fluid systems in the body – the lymph and the blood circulation - to create a streaming in the body - the lymph and the blood sweeping, working with the fluid systems is rarely used. Movements are circling, tissue in gentle movements. The flat hand with the touch light, the hands lifting the therapy. The technique is very specific, developing this new approach to massage.

Rhythmical Massage is a medical therapy; therapists are trained to a high level of expertise. The Massage may be used individually, or alongside other Complementary Therapies or Physiotherapy, or in conjunction with natural remedies or conventional medication. Rhythmical Massage is ‘prescribed’ by the doctor at Park Attwood, as an integral part of the treatment.

Rhythmical Massage stimulates the bowel to function healthily: it is so skilful and so light, with no pressure, that it is suitable for Crohn’s where other forms of massage could really aggravate symptoms. The stroking, sweeping motions go with the gut, not just soothing but actively encouraging, accelerating the healing process.

There was no Aromatherapy benefit with this massage, in fact the Viscum and Hypericum oil my therapist used was pretty much fragrance free. After just one session I slept like a log that night, the effect was instantaneous. My sleep patterns were completely restored and my quality of sleep hugely improved. It is while we are asleep that our bodies heal, so this made a huge difference for me. It would take me weeks at home to restore the balance that they can achieve at the Clinic in a few days. My symptoms are significantly reduced over the past two months.

One of the great advantages at Park Attwood for anyone with Crohn’s is the food, which is all home-baked on the premises using local organic produce. It’s tailored to your particular needs, and they are great at producing something like a little steamed fish. I also enjoy the fact that when I am at Park Attwood it takes the pressure off my parents, in particular my Mum who spends so much energy trying to find the right foods for me. It is quite a relief to know that she gets a break too.

In my case at Park Attwood, Massage Therapy was complemented with natural remedies including Cuprum per Chamomilla and Cuprum per Melissa, one morning and one evening, which combine soothing herbal ingredients (natural antispasmodics chamomile and lemon balm) with the warming properties of copper. Mistletoe Therapy (injected close to the site of the inflammation) is also prescribed periodically.

About the Author
Orla Liddy was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease at the age of 16 and was successfully treated with steroids until the age of 21. After this time she became increasingly interested in exploring Complementary and Alternative medicine as a way of managing her symptoms, and obtaining a better understanding of her illness. She has just completed her Bachelor of Architecture degree. Orla may be contacted through Park Attwood Clinic on Tel: 01299 861444; Fax: 01299 861375; info@parkattwood.org; www.parkattwood.org

Further Information
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Other useful contacts: National Association for Colitis and Crohn’s Disease. Tel: 0845 1302233; www.nacc.org.uk or www.crohns.org.uk

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