Sydney, NSW 2109 Australia

Telephone: (02) 9850
Facsimile: (02) 9850 9457

E-mail:
Web: www.pr.mq.edu.au

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Media Release

New technique brings hope for chronic pain sufferers

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A Macquarie University research team is using a pain treatment device first developed for the Russian Space Program to treat chronic neck pain, with remarkable results in a clinical trial.

For the past 12 months, Macquarie University chiropractic PhD student Andrew Vitiello has been testing the Electro Neuro Adaptive Regulator (ENAR), originally used to treat injured cosmonauts who were spending up to three months in space.

"There was a lot of anecdotal evidence that this device worked for a range of illnesses and disabilities," says Vitiello. "But it was produced during a time in world politics where it was about one-upmanship and the Russians did their research quite separately.

Vitiello and supervisors Associate Professor Rod Bonello and Dr Henry Pollard from the University's Department of Health and Chiropractic, chose a condition that was quite common and very difficult to treat for the pilot study – chronic neck pain.

Twenty-four people who had not received therapy for three months were divided into three groups. The first group was treated with Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) therapy, another group received ENAR, and the control group unknowingly received a sham treatment.

Results showed that people who received the TENS therapy were no better off than if they received no therapy at all, whereas people who received the ENAR therapy found that not only had their pain levels improved, so had their functional capabilities and quality of life.

"This is very exciting because it has proved to be quite an effective tool in reducing pain," says Vitiello. "From a clinician's point of view, if you ease pain, you can get onto rehabilitation much quicker. Obviously the biggest thing with chronic pain is that for people pain equals more harm. 'I can't exercise because it hurts, because it hurts I may be doing more damage.' This allows us to get over that hurdle quite easily and effectively."

The next step for the ENAR team is to broaden the scope of the treatment.

Media contact: Kathy Vozella, Macquarie University Media Manager (02) 98507456 or Andrew Vitiello 0438 677327