Evidence-Based Use of Pulsed Electromagnetic Field Therapy in Clinical Plastic Surgery

Berish Strauch MD, Charles Herman MD, Richard Dabb MD, Louis J. Ignarro PhD, Arthur A. Pilla PhD

Background

The initial development of pulsed electromagnetic field (PEMF) therapy and its evolution over the last century for use in clinical surgery has been slow, primarily because of lack of scientifically-derived, evidence-based knowledge of the mechanism of action.

Objective

Our objective was to review the major scientific breakthroughs and current understanding of the mechanism of action of PEMF therapy, providing clinicians with a sound basis for optimal use.

Methods

A literature review was conducted, including mechanism of action and biologic and clinical studies of PEMF. Using case illustrations, a holistic exposition on the clinical use of PEMF in plastic surgery was performed.

Results

PEMF therapy has been used successfully in the management of postsurgical pain and edema, the treatment of chronic wounds, and in facilitating vasodilatation and angiogenesis. Using scientific support, the authors present the currently accepted mechanism of action of PEMF therapy.

Conclusions

This review shows that plastic surgeons have at hand a powerful tool with no known side effects for the adjunctive, noninvasive, nonpharmacologic management of postoperative pain and edema. Given the recent rapid advances in development of portable and economical PEMF devices, what has been of most significance to the plastic surgeon is the laboratory and clinical confirmation of decreased pain and swelling following injury or surgery. (Aesthetic Surg J 2009;29:135–143.)

Dr. Strauch is Professor and Emeritus Chair of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY. Dr. Herman is the Medical Director of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Pocono Health System, East Stroudsburg, PA, and is Assistant Clinical Professor of Surgery at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY. Dr. Dabb is Associate Professor of Surgery, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD; and Clinical Professor of Surgery, Milton S. Hershey Medicine Center, Hershey, PA. Dr. Ignarro is a Nobel Laureate and Distinguished Professor of Pharmacology, University of California – Los Angeles School of Medicine, Beverly Hills, CA. Dr. Pilla is Professor in the Department of Biomedical Engineering, Columbia University, New York, and in the Department of Orthopaedics, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY