Doctors as patients
Magnetism and pain relief

Sir,

After successfully completing the 1995 London marathon, my mind soon turned to pain relief. Interestingly, participants were given four complimentary, 5 mm button ferromagnets, advertised to relieve pain and stiffness. The day after the race, I experienced severe pain in both thighs and was extremely stiff. Determined to do my normal quota of surgery and visits, I used this as a unique opportunity to test magnetotherapy. In the absence of specific instructions except ‘place over the painful area’, I placed the four magnets, secured with plaster, at 10 cm intervals to form a square on my right anterior thigh. My left thigh was equally painful and acted as the control. I wore the magnets for 48 hours. I perceived no difference in pain, stiffness, or walking ability over the two days; both legs recovered at the same rate, and to my relief I was jogging again five days later.

Magnetism can be produced by simple ferromagnets or electromagnets. The latter are usually pulsed for medical treatments. There are a few reports on the use of magnets for analgesia. A literature search revealed only one report of the use of ferromagnets; magnetic necklaces were used in a randomized, double-blind, controlled trial and were found to have no effect on chronic shoulder and neck pain in 101 volunteers.1

Pulsed electromagnetism has been demonstrated as an effective analgesic in several studies, including the treatment of neck pain,2,3 perineal trauma following childbirth,4 refractory rotator cuff tendinitis,5 dental analgesia,6 and osteoarthritis of the knee and neck.7 There seems to be no evidence to support the use of simple ferromagnets sold as alternative therapy. However, pulsed electromagnetism is worth further study for relief of chronic pain.

M J B WILKINSON

Department of General Practice, University of Birmingham, The Medical School, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT

References