

## A plate in her mouth cured her of years of suffering

**D**IRKIE VAN DEN BERG just couldn't get by without her painkillers – she always made sure she had a packet in her handbag.

Her headaches got so bad she started avoiding social gatherings in case she got one.

And when she lay down with a wet cloth over her forehead, her kids knew they'd better behave.

"I used to tell them they'd remember me as the mom who always got headaches," says Dirkie, a Kempton Park auditor's assistant.

She was often absent from work, sometimes for longer than a week. "It sounds awful to say your head aches, but it made me so sick I couldn't think straight any more. It became impossible to concentrate on my work."

Dirkie suffered like this for 15 years, until she became too shy to mention the blinding attacks. She went to doctors and hospitals for painkillers, dutifully swallowed her pills, but never breathed a word to anyone in case they'd think she was neurotic.

Three years ago this all changed. A doctor established that tension, especially in her jaw muscles, had caused all the misery. He had a paper-thin mouth plate made to counteract it.

Then the headaches stopped. "I couldn't believe it. I continued carrying the pills with me, just in case the pain returned," she recounts. But when nothing happened she threw them away.

Within weeks her whole life changed for the better, and the treatment had cost less than R2 000 – a fraction of what she'd squandered for years on tablets. And to cap it all, her medical aid footed the bill.

Today Dirkie says her life began at 50.

THERE'S no such thing as a normal headache, says Dr Elliot Shevel, a Johannesburg mouth and jaw specialist who opened a headache clinic seven years ago.

"Someone who's healthy shouldn't get a headache. But because people who have the tendency often suffer headaches from an early age, they accept them as an unavoidable part of life. It's only when the pain becomes so bad that it affects their work or personal relationships that they start thinking about it as abnormal," he says.

Research has shown that 30 per cent of all adults – most of them women – have headaches.

"Headaches are one of those medical



By INGE KÜHNE  
Pictures: JOHN LIEBENBERG

**The doctor told Dirkie tension in her jaw was causing the headaches, and designed a paper-thin plate to solve the problem. There are many other possible causes of headaches, as experts at a special clinic explain . . .**

problems that affect people from all walks of life – rich or poor, from all races or social classes, throughout the world," says Elliot.

The fact that women fare worse is probably because of hormonal changes. Many women begin experiencing problems during puberty. But recent research has shown the number of male sufferers is increasing.

Doctors regard headaches as pain in the face, head or neck. It usually occurs at the temples, where it tends to throb.

Headaches are also inclined to affect the back of the head or the crown. Some people

experience pain only on one side of the head, some always get the same kind of headache, while in others the condition varies. The pain ranges from slight discomfort to unbearable agony. And the causes are legion.

These days many doctors believe migraine is simply a very severe headache.

Elliot says nearly all migraine sufferers are also afflicted by severe muscular tension. As soon as it's treated the migraines cease.

BECAUSE so many factors cause headaches, sufferers often spend years treating the pain without ever getting to the source.

Many believe headaches have a single cause, such as a sinus problem or eating too much chocolate, but headaches usually

other areas of the body or a brain tumour, but this seldom happens.

Diet is the trigger in only about 10 per cent of cases: people with allergies usually know which foods will get their temples pounding.

Strangely enough painkillers often aggravate matters.

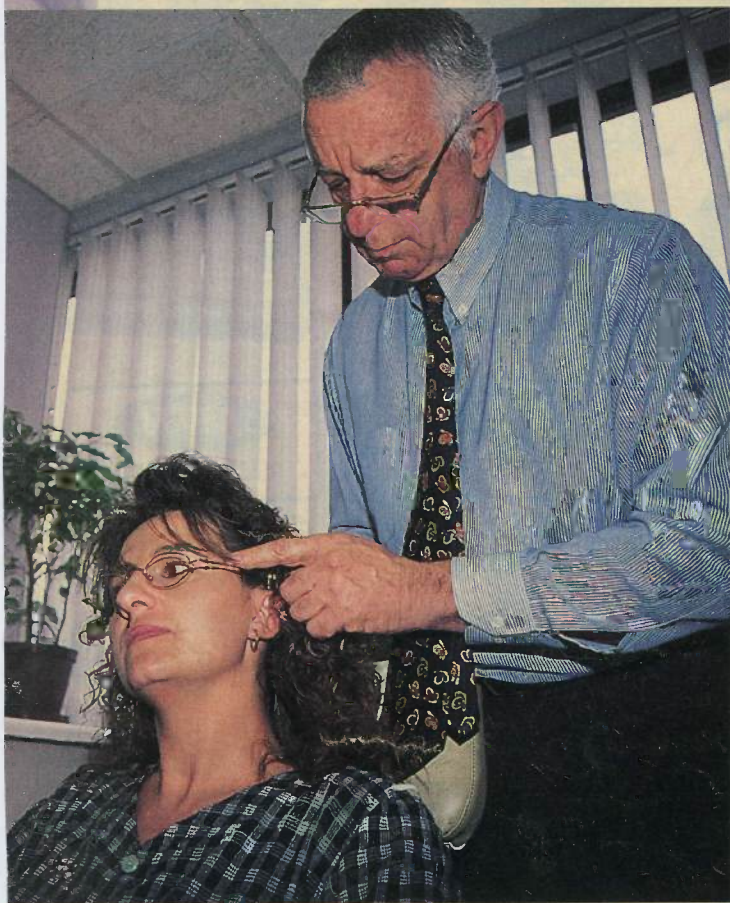
"It's a vicious circle. You take a tablet to relieve the pain. But the more you take the fewer endorphins – natural painkillers – your body produces. Eventually the patient becomes totally dependent on painkillers to be without pain," explains Elliot.

One of the biggest breakthroughs against headaches is the mouth plate worn by Dirkie. It fits in the palate and brings relief within a few days for patients whose headaches are caused by muscular tension.

**MAIN PICTURE:** Dirkie van den Berg with the plate that made a difference to her life.

**BELOW:** Dr Elliot Shevel examines a patient at the headache clinic he opened seven years ago.

# Vasbyt – now my headache's gone!



result from a combination of factors.

Elliot believes the best way to get to the heart of the matter is to question the patient thoroughly and investigate every possible cause. The clinic boasts the services of a neurologist, radiologist and specially trained sisters who together with Elliot make diagnoses.

"In modern society where almost everyone is exposed to severe stress, the majority of headaches are stress-related. Many patients worsen the minute they encounter a stressful situation. We find that muscular tension is the underlying cause of most headaches," says Elliot.

Common triggers are some foods, contraceptives, hormone replacement therapy, badly fitting false teeth, sinusitis and muscular tension.

Headaches are also caused by infections in

As a mouth and jaw specialist Elliot has often encountered patients who suffered from severe headaches. He stumbled on the mouth plate almost by accident.

The plate changes the posture of the jaw, neck and head. A relaxed jaw hangs open slightly and the tongue lies comfortably in the mouth. But the minute you become tense your jaw muscles stiffen and the tongue pulls up to lodge against the palate. The little plate forces the tongue down and thus restores the natural muscular balance. Tension eases and the headaches cease.

More than 90 per cent of his patients are headache-free now. But there are headaches which science can't explain.

NOW a whole new way of life has opened up for Dirkie and fellow sufferers who have been cured.

"Headaches influence people's work and relationships, even with their children. It's tremendously satisfying to help someone who's suffering so much. People who for years have been medically unfit to work have walked out of here to resume their careers," says Elliot.

As Dirkie puts it: "A new world has opened up for me. Everything suddenly looks different. For the first time in years I can actually laugh uproariously." **Y**