

A Tennis Champion, and Neurologist, Who's Watching Your Back

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WHILE traveling with his family in Africa several years ago, Dr. Brian Hainline, a neurologist and sports medicine expert with a practice in Lake Success, met a local medicine man in Korogo, a village in Ivory Coast.

Dr. Hainline said that the medicine man, though familiar with back pain as a result of injury, was "dumbfounded by the notion of chronic back pain" that persists for months or years.

"Someone gets injured in the field, they take care of it, they go back to work," he said of the villagers.

Partly, it is a matter of a different way of life, Dr. Hainline said. "Walking around and gathering in a field is much better for the back than sitting all day and then getting up and rushing to do something" or being a weekend warrior.

Dr. Hainline's experience in Africa became an anecdote in his book "Back Pain Understood: A Cutting-Edge Approach to Healing Your Back" (Medicus Press, 2007). The guide to understanding and managing back pain delves into the mind-body connection, or what he calls "the back and forth of the mind and the body, which is very different than mind over matter."

The cause of recurring back pain, which is the focus of Dr. Hainline's practice, is often difficult to discern, he said. Chiropractors, acupuncturists, orthopedic surgeons, neurosurgeons, rheumatologists, massage therapists and physiatrists have overlapping and divergent opinions on how to treat it, he said, including manual therapy, medication, physical therapy and surgery.

"Sometimes pain means you just really hurt yourself," he said. "But sometimes it triggers something else, and the art and the compassion of medicine is trying to uncover what that might be" and helping the patient deal with it.

For instance, after someone has a fender-bender, chronic pain can linger for months, Dr. Hainline said.

"What we don't really look at is that they were in their car and their child was in the back seat of the car and they are estranged from their spouse and they are worried about finances," he said. "Someone hits them and their

life just falls apart and their kid is ill and this is the straw that broke the camel's back."

Dr. Hainline, 51, is chief of neurology and integrative pain medicine at ProHealth Care Associates, a multispecialty group with more than 100 doctors. A Douglaston resident, he grew up in Detroit, played varsity tennis and majored in philosophy at the University of Notre Dame before studying medicine at the University of Chicago.

He is the chief medical officer of the United States Open tennis championships and, with his son, Arthur, 20, is ranked No. 1 for father-son doubles in the Eastern Section of the United States Tennis Association.

When making a diagnosis, Dr. Hainline looks for a precipitating event. When patients tell him, for instance, that they simply bent over to brush their teeth or woke up with severe pain, he tries to dig deeper into their story.

However, he acknowledges that "part of just the reality of living is that our body parts give out on us, too."

Working with the United States Open for 15 years, Dr. Hainline has had to make judgment calls for tennis champions with lower back injuries.

In 1999, when Pete Sampras was going for his 13th Grand Slam victory, he had an acute herniated lumbar disc. Dr. Hainline debated whether to alleviate the athlete's pain so that he could play seven rounds of tennis but "risk him injuring his back forever." The decision was for Mr. Sampras to withdraw from the competition, rest and rehabilitate. He went on to two more Grand Slam wins.

When Andre Agassi faced the final match of his professional tennis career, Dr. Hainline was more willing to let him play.

"It is always balancing the players' safety and the good of the tournament, and it is always erring on the side of patient safety," he said.

To keep his own back from aching, Dr. Hainline does simple exercises for 15 to 20 minutes every morning and race-walks or swims in the evenings.

"I spend every morning checking in with my back," he said.

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