



There are 149 causes of headache - and this woman knows them all. Caroline Phillips meets the Queen of Pain

Marcia Wilkinson has been suffering from headaches for 72 years. And if she can't get rid of them, no one can. This British neurologist, known to colleagues as Mother Migraine, has been studying headaches since 1953.

She recognises at least 149 causes of headache, from Chinese takeaways to male orgasm. She probably knows more about the subject than anyone else in the galaxy.

Last month Dr Wilkinson, 76, was the star turn at the European Headache Federation, in Sardinia, where she wowed the 783 delegates with her lecture on *Great Names in Headache History* - the Great Names being people who had investigated headaches rather than had them. In November she will be talking in Turkey on *Dangerous Headaches*, including those that can land you in a wooden box.

When she's not lecturing or at the City of London Migraine Clinic, which she founded, Dr Wilkinson, who "retired" 11 years ago, lives in a cowshed (now converted) at the bottom of her daughter's Hertfordshire garden, and digs midst the herbal headache cure, feverfew.

Headaches affect us all - even Maureen Lipman, Elton John and Pam Ayres. One in 10 people in Britain suffer from migraine, 30 per cent get headaches and 98 per cent of everyone in the world gets a headache on occasion. The occasion, says Dr Wilkinson, may be when you are hit on the head with a hammer.

As children, boys are more likely to suffer. After the onset of puberty, women suffer three times as often as men. When it comes to migraine, most sufferers are struck by the time they are 20 years old and it is rare to get it after the age of 50.

It is known that Prince Charles takes snake venom for his (it's a homoeopathic remedy), and that Michael Jackson had a brain scan for his. That a man in China, who had suffered months of headaches, was claimed to have worms in his skull; and that Joe DeMarco, a D-Day veteran, was discovered three years ago to have had a bullet in his head since 1944.

Pharmaceutical companies never tire of telling us that 50 million work days a year are lost in Britain due to headaches, not all of them from bullets in the brain, and at some cost to business. This figure was somewhat inflated by a computer engineer, Alan Frost, who was dismissed in 1993 after taking off 175 days in two years with a cold and headache.

There are different kinds of headache - the everyday tension headache, the more selective migraine, and the mother of all headaches, the cluster headache.

- A headache, says Dr Wilkinson, is really just a pain in the face; it may occur 15-20 times a month.
- Migraine is an episodic headache which lasts ▶

MOTHER of all HEADACHES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE LOWN

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from four to 72 hours, comes up to four times a month, is associated with vomiting and nausea and is sometimes preceded by flashing lights.

● The cluster headache comes in bouts lasting 4-6 weeks, with up to 20 attacks a day. It is, says Dr Wilkinson, like labour without an epidural. "Except that you forget the pain of childbirth."

The geography of the headache is important to the diagnosis – whether it is in the front of the head, ventures further afield to the top of the head or takes an Awayday to the back of the head.

Patients variously describe symptoms as being like an iron in the temple, a hot poker behind the eyes, a hammer/ice-pick in the skull or a tight band round the head. Sufferers describe everything from blind spots, zigzag lines and flashing lights to Catherine wheels in front of their eyes.

Dr Wilkinson gets migraine. "As a child, I would go out with my grandmother and be sick," says the doc, who has a deep voice and a brilliant mind covered with a gardening hat. She has an impish humour, wears a man's shirt, sensible shoes and academic's silver bob, speaks with perfect enunciation and seems like a Victorian adventurer. "Now I just get migraine with aura, which means flashing lights but no headache."

She is thus well-qualified to talk about headaches. In addition, Dr Wilkinson read medicine at Somerville College, Oxford, from where she progressed to the Radcliffe Infirmary and her first consultant appointment, in 1953, at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital. Thereafter she ran a specialist neuro-rehabilitation unit; set up the City of London Migraine Clinic in 1970 – it's a charity; and became known for her work on, wait for it, cervical spondylosis and her research on compression of the median nerve carpal tunnel and carcinomatous neuromyopathies.

There are, she says, almost as many triggers to headaches as there are people having them. There is the salami headache, triggered by nitrates in the meat. The cappuccino headache, courtesy of

caffeine. The perfume headache, sparked by strong smells.

There are sex headaches: those which occur in women who say "Not tonight, darling" before the act, and those which men get during it: orgasmic cephalalgia, which can last up to three hours,

caused by a sudden rise in blood pressure.

Plus those caused by coughing, laughing, flashing lights, too many painkillers, loud noise, lack of food, taking holidays, not taking holidays, too much exertion, too much sleep, onions, ice cream, alcohol, cheese, citrus fruits, chocolate, and Chinese food, with its monosodium glutamate. That there is a low incidence of headaches among Eskimos has not yet been explained by researchers, but may not be wholly attributed to their dearth of Chinese takeaways.

In an attempt to help people with hammers in their heads, the European Headache Federation has compiled *The Headache Yellow Pages*, the must-have headache book, with contacts for headache doctors and foundations. The group also plans to publish Michelin-style guides to headache research, with coveted three-head ratings going to facilities ahead, so to speak, of



Head to head: Dr Marcia Wilkinson, known as Mother Migraine, and writer Caroline Phillips, bravely concealing a "corker" of a headache

the rest. Perish the thought. "Are you sure the Americans aren't behind this?" asks Dr Wilkinson, looking over her toffee-framed spectacles. "Not unnaturally, we think our London clinic, which treats patients, is the best way of helping them."

Whatever the cause, the headache has been bewildering scientists for ages. Egyptians apparently blamed the ache on evil spirits and went in for a bit of trephining – drilling a hole in the head to let the spirits out. Did that work? "I think, if the patient survived, it probably did. You know, the greater pain removing the lesser."

In the 11th century, doctors stitched a clove or garlic into the temple, in an attempt to relieve headache pain. (Answer as above.) By the 17th century the Swiss were shaving heads and covering them with poisonous Spanish flies whose bites were supposed to alleviate headache "Counter-irritation," explains Dr Wilkinson.

Until late-Victorian times, Europeans pulled teeth to make headaches disappear. (Answer as above.) And across the Atlantic, until about 40 years ago, it was said that the American neurologist Dr Harold Wolff used to cut open the heads of patients in the throes of headaches to

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sever various nerves in the face. "Actually, that's an exaggeration," says Dr Wilkinson. "He did one or two temporal artery biopsies, which involved only a little bit of head-cutting."

Less extreme sufferers would follow peculiar diets, like not eating anything except stewed lamb and pears. Did that work? "If you believe in things," says Dr Wilkinson, "they work."

There are no end of different theories about headaches (like the common cold, this is a little-understood area). You can read about pathophysiology in the works of Wolff, the seminal headache author; dip into the headache classifi-

cations of Dr Arnold Friedman; swing along with the 5-HT theory of chemical disturbance; or subscribe to the German neurologist Hartwig Heyck's analysis. Unlike me, Dr Wilkinson understands these. But nothing is proven. "Nobody," she says, "actually knows why a headache comes on."

Worse still (guaranteed to give you a headache, this) there is, says Dr Wilkinson firmly, no cure. Yes, you can take the new wonder drug Sumatriptan, or pick some feverfew from Dr Wilkinson's garden, or go to her clinic for an anti-sickness drug followed by paracetamol or aspirin. But these only alleviate the symptoms.

Dr Wilkinson breaks in. "They murmured as they took their leave, 'I'm sure for this disease'. That should be stuck into every physician's consulting room."

Scientists become headless chickens when it comes to headaches. (Whether chickens get headaches is another point, about which more later.) This is because headaches, unlike blood pressure and pregnancy hormones, are hard to measure. Patients can come up with horrid descriptions of their aches. But relatively little money and time have been dedicated to research – possibly because headaches mostly affect women. And, anyway, it is notoriously difficult to do research on sufferers.

"If someone tells you he always gets a headache on Tuesdays when the coalman has failed to deliver the coal, it is absolutely certain that once you've got him into hospital and booked him an expensive bed, he won't have a headache. Virtually nobody ever has a headache in hospital."

Most of the research, adds Dr Wilkinson gloomily, has been done on chronic medical misuse headaches (caused by too many drugs) and tension headaches. "I have tried to do research on myself. But migraine comes you know not whence nor when, and it lasts 45 minutes, then it has gone."

The question exercising scientists today is whether animals get headaches – as there seems not much point in trying headache medicines on them if they don't have headaches in the first place. One doctor took photographs of monkeys in Australia which looked, with their furrowed brows and forehead-rubbing paws, as though they were suffering from a headache. But researchers are divided on the question of whether animals need to say "Not tonight, darling". Where does Dr Wilkinson stand on the issue? "I'd believe anything of an Australian monkey, wouldn't you?"

"As we don't know whether animals get headaches, it is difficult to draw direct conclusions from how an animal reacts to drugs and theories."

The point is that headaches are accompanied by the enlargement of cranial blood vessels. "So scientists do things like look at the reaction of animals' blood vessels and what they excrete and other physiological changes."

In the mid-1960s, Pramod Saxena, a Dutch pharmacology professor, began studying ways to test headache drugs on animals and found how to give pigs a migraine – or rather, how to get pig blood vessels to emulate human blood vessels during a migraine. "The question of when does a pig have a headache is still a problem," murmurs Dr Wilkinson.

Ah, but I forgot to tell you something. I suffer from one of the most disabling ailments of civilisation. Headaches. The result of failing to remain on a double-decker-sized horse when its brakes failed. After the accident, doctors did a CAT scan and found I had a brain. Nowadays I get day-long headaches where a tractor ploughs through my head and I see flying caterpillars. I had a corker the day I saw Dr Wilkinson. But now it has gone. And I've stuck a plaster on the drill-hole, eaten the clove of garlic and swatted the poisonous Spanish flies.