



FEATURE

MEDICINE AND THE MEDIA

The cricketer promoting shockwave therapy for erectile dysfunction

He says he didn't need it anyway, and no evidence supports its use over sildenafil, writes **Ingrid Torjesen**

Ingrid Torjesen, journalist, London

The story—a cricket legend who had an impotence treatment for a problem he said he didn't have is now urging other men to follow his lead—was a gift to headline writers earlier this month. The story was headlined “Testicle match special” in the *Sun*¹ and was covered by almost every other national newspaper.

A doctor had told the former cricketer Ian Botham of a treatment called linear shockwave therapy provided by the company Vigore.

Better erections

Vigore's website says that this is “a high tech, low intensity, non-invasive, painless application of linear soundwave technology to the area around the penis.” The company claims that it stimulates blood vessel growth, increasing penile blood flow and resulting in better erections. The website adds that only four 20 minute painless treatments are needed, that the effect should last a minimum of two years, and that there are no side effects. A course costs about £3000 (€3600; \$4000).

Botham had a course of treatment and was impressed with the results, but he insisted that he didn't need it in the first place, seeing it as a prophylactic intervention. “There's no downside to this—only a big upside,” he told the *Sun*. “It's prevention rather than cure. I didn't need the treatment, but I didn't want to be worrying about it in ten years' time.” He added, “I have never used Viagra [sildenafil] because I have never needed to. There are side effects to popping pills.”

Botham now acts as ambassador for the therapy, but a spokesman emphasised that this occurred after Botham received the treatment, which he paid for off his own bat

Asked to comment on Botham's preventive use of the therapy, a spokesman for Vigore dashed the hopes of men everywhere. “It is not advertised as a preventive treatment, and we don't make claims that it is a preventive treatment,” he told *The BMJ*. Ageing and various health conditions and treatments can reduce the ability to obtain and sustain an erection. “At 60 you might

not realise the level of deterioration, you might not want to admit it to yourself,” the spokesman said. Some men who would not be diagnosed clinically with erectile dysfunction might resort to self prescribing and buying sildenafil online “to ensure they perform.”

Botham now acts as ambassador for the therapy in a commercial arrangement, but the spokesman emphasised that this occurred after Botham received the treatment, which he paid for off his own bat. But, puns aside, is this treatment worth having?

Cheap Viagra

Asif Muneer, a consultant urological surgeon and andrologist at University College London Hospitals Foundation Trust, told *The BMJ* that men worried about their erectile performance should not need to resort to expensive private therapies. Because cheap generic versions of sildenafil now exist, men should no longer face difficulty getting their doctor to prescribe it.

However, about shockwave therapy, he said, “There is some early evidence that it does have an effect on the vasculature.”

Conventional high intensity shockwave therapy is an effective non-invasive treatment for breaking up stones, such as in the gall bladder and kidney. In rat studies low intensity shockwave treatment increased expression of vascular endothelial growth factor, suggesting it had angiogenic potential. Small clinical studies, predominantly in patients with cardiac conditions, have shown that the therapy can improve ischaemia by promoting neovascularisation.²

“The vascular aetiology of erectile dysfunction is very similar to what happens in the heart,” Muneer explained. “This is why they started to use it on the penis.”

Although no large trials have been performed to quantify efficacy or harms, several small clinical studies have found a positive effect, including a randomised double blind, sham controlled study in 67 responders to phosphodiesterase type 5 inhibitors such as sildenafil.³

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ's policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

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- 1 Hamilton M. Testicle match special. Cricket legend Sir Ian Botham bravely reveals impotence treatment after having privates zapped. *Sun* 2016 Aug 14. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/1606663/sir-ian-botham-has-privates-zapped-in-bid-to-cure-impotence1606663/>

- 2 Wang W, Liu H, Song M, Fang W, Yuan F. Clinical effect of cardiac shock wave therapy on myocardial ischemia in patients with ischemic heart failure. *J Cardiovasc Pharmacol Ther* 2016;21:381-7. doi:10.1177/1074248415616189 pmid:26657563.
- 3 Vardi Y, Appel B, Kilchevsky A, Gruenwald I. Does low intensity extracorporeal shock wave therapy have a physiological effect on erectile function? Short-term results of a randomized, double-blind, sham controlled study. *J Urol* 2012;187:1769-75. doi:10.1016/j.juro.2011.12.117 pmid:22425129.

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