A thirty-year-old aviator was found to have multiple discrete, tan coloured patches on his back during an annual aircrew medical examination. These skin lesions, of which eight were visible, were symmetrical in distribution, circular, with a smooth surface. They measured 8cm in diameter. The patient was otherwise well, with no history of dermatological, hepatic or neurological problems. Specifically he had no signs or symptoms of neurofibromatosis (von Recklinghausen’s disease).

On questioning, he gave a history of undergoing therapeutic cupping while abroad on holiday, 3 weeks previously. Cupping is a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) therapy dating back at least 2,000 years (1). It involves the application of suction to acupoints on a patient’s skin using one of several kinds of cups. Glass cups were used in the case of this patient, but bamboo and earthenware forms are alternatives. Seven types of cupping are practiced in China (2). These encompass various techniques for generating suction; flame, steam or manual pump, as well as preceding or proceeding steps such as incisions in the skin or the application of acupuncture needles. Cupping has been used to treat a wide variety of ills, including low back pain (3), asthma (4) gout (5), and herpes zoster (1). It is thought to stimulate the movement round the body of blood, lymph and even energy (Qi or Chi – in Taoism the animating force behind all forms of life), thereby relieving pain and resolving congestion (8). The therapy is not without risk of side effects, with case reports linking cupping to keloid scarring (6) and haemophilia A (7). Cupping is enjoying a renaissance, not just as alternative medical therapy but, as was the case with this aviator, as a spa treatment (9).

Reference