Question:

What is the practice of “cupping” that was seen on several of the athletes at this year’s Olympics?

Answer:

This year’s Olympic Games did inadvertently highlight a trend where several athletes (notably the swimmers) were seen with red, circular marks on their skin attributed to “cupping.” What is “cupping?” It is an ancient form of therapy used by the Egyptians, Chinese, and Middle Eastern cultures where suction is applied to various trigger points on the body (similar to acupuncture) in an effort to increase blood flow to that area. The process typically entails the placement of small, sometimes heated, glass jars on the skin with a vacuum suction effect thus raising the skin within the jar. The jars may also be made from other materials, such as silicone, and the application can be done “wet” or “dry.” The potential claimed benefits of this practice include relief for sore muscles and decreasing inflammation, among other things.

The practice of cupping is considered to be generally safe if one goes to a trained health professional, and reported side effects may include bruising, burns, mild discomfort, and skin infection. However, little is definitively known about the efficacy of cupping. Numerous randomized controlled trials have examined the effectiveness of cupping; however, many of the trials show a risk of bias and lack reliable, high-quality evidence. Additional studies analyze several conditions that may be seen in workers’ comp, including nonspecific low back pain, chronic neck pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and various other types of musculoskeletal pain. The British Cupping Society promotes cupping for various conditions, including rheumatic diseases, migraines, anxiety, and depression.

Cupping, like any form of alternative medicine, should be considered only after careful contemplation taking into account the overall therapeutic management and goals for the patient. The evidence and information surrounding the benefits and risks must be weighed for each individual in order to arrive at the best clinical decision. What does all of this mean? The conclusion at this point is that cupping is probably safe and may be effective but more high-quality research is needed.

References:
http://www.britishcuppingsociety.org/
http://www.odj-kwc.com/