

Cancer centre takes close look at 'healing' touch

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Lisa Fontanella became something of a legend around the Cross Cancer Institute four years ago when she was helping her terminally-ill sister cope with cancer pain.

Fontanella is a Reiki master and used the special form of touch therapy daily on her sister Patty Smith, whose breast cancer had spread to her bones, brain and other areas of her body.

It worked so well, says Fontanella, that at one point a doctor expressed astonishment that her sister was on the lowest dose of pain medication of anyone in the hospital.

When Patty told him her sister was doing Reiki on her, the doctor asked for a demonstration and invited other doctors and nurses to watch.

One thing led to another and today

About Reiki

Reiki (pronounced ray-key) is:

- A type of touch therapy in which practitioners claim to re-establish the energy balance in areas of the body experiencing disease and discomfort by laying their hands on 18 specific areas.

- A technique for stress reduction and

relaxation that allows everyone to tap into an unlimited supply of "life force energy" to improve health and enhance the quality of life.

- Treats the whole person including body, emotions, mind and spirit and creates many beneficial effects including relaxation and feelings of peace, security and well-being.

Fontanella is involved in a research project at the Cross designed to see if Reiki can play a role in decreasing pain and the amount of Demerol, morphine and other painkillers cancer patients typically require as their disease progresses.

Fontanella was impressed by the willingness of the medical staff to consider an alternative therapy that even she admits has a "magical, mystical" aspect to it.

A Reiki treatment takes about an hour to an hour and a half and involves simply laying hands on meridian points similar to those used in acupuncture.

Participants are fully clothed and Reiki can be done anytime anywhere, said Fontanella.

But Reiki is more than just touch — and this is where the magical mystery tour begins.



John Lucas, *The Journal*

Please see REIKI/B2

Reiki master Lisa Fontanella lays hands on Dr. Karin Olson

REIKI

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Fontanella and other practitioners of this traditional Japanese healing practice say what they're really doing is channelling the energy of the universe or life force into the person's body. It's usually done by the hands, but Fontanella says it can even be done mentally at a distance.

This life force helps restore physical, mental, emotional and spiritual balance.

"I'm a conduit for energy," Fontanella explains. "A little cosmic garden hose. My hands, which are normally ice cold, heat up like a couple of furnaces."

In her sister's case, she says, the Reiki helped counter severe muscle spasms all over her body that were a side-effect of the drug Tamoxifen, a hormone treatment.

"I found that even if I put my hands on her for five minutes or so, that was enough for her to relax so she could get around without using a wheelchair or her canes. Without it she certainly wouldn't have been able to walk."

The study, which is headed by Dr. Karin Olson, co-ordinator of nursing research at the Cross, will involve 100 patients. Half will get two Reiki sessions along with the pain medications they're on; the other half will simply carry on with their medication.

Both groups will keep track of how much pain they're experiencing on a scale of zero to 10 where zero is no pain and 10 is the worst pain they've ever

experienced. Patients' pulse rate and blood pressure measurements will also be recorded.

Since the Reiki sessions will be given when patients normally tend to nap, the study should be able to show if any improvement is related simply to relaxation rather than Reiki, says Olson.

An initial pilot study enlisted 20 people who experienced chronic pain from all sorts of causes. Seventeen of them showed a significant reduction of pain after one Reiki treatment.

By adding a control group, the current study should help clarify whether the improvement those people felt could be attributed to a placebo effect. But even the placebo effect is increasingly being recognized in medical circles as a real and beneficial treatment.

Should this study show a reduction in pain among those getting Reiki compared to the control group, Olson has another study in mind that would involve one group getting treatment from a Reiki master and another getting the laying on of hands in a similar way, but carried out by someone not trained in Reiki. That should show whether it is Reiki or simply the touching procedure that is producing the benefit.

The study is funded by the Alternative Cancer Research foundation based in Calgary. It has also helped pay for a study at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre in Calgary on the impact of mindful meditation on cancer patients.

That such studies are being done at all shows a sea-change in attitude among the medical establishment. They may not be embracing alternative therapies but are at least willing to

consider them today, says Olson.

It's partly a recognition that many, if not most, cancer patients are using something other than what the medical community provides, Olson says.

"The current approach is since it's obvious they're doing it, we should get in there and figure them out so we know which ones not to recommend."

But Olson emphasizes the alternative therapies are considered more as a complement to, not a replacement for, drugs or other standard treatments.

The primary end-point of this study is the amount of analgesics (painkillers) people require, she says. "We think people who get Reiki will require fewer break-through medications — what they need between regular scheduled doses."

Less pain medication generally means better quality of life. "Patients have told us that pain is one of the most central issues in their lives. When it is, it has a major impact on their quality of life."

Fontanella says most of the patients who have had Reiki so far simply zonk out. "They're sound asleep after the second hand position."

Some have told her they haven't slept that soundly in years. One woman, who later told Fontanella she could no longer sleep more than 15 minutes at a time, slept through the entire session.

Another older woman took Fontanella aback at first because she was wracked with sobs when the Reiki session ended.

"She told me it was the first time since her husband died 25 years ago that anyone had touched her. My heart just broke for her."