

Gentle therapy can ease variety of body ailments

A gentle, but powerful, hands-on technique called craniocervical therapy is being used to treat chronic pain, balance disturbances, eye difficulties and other health problems.

St. Joseph's Community Hospital of West Bend offers craniocervical therapy through its massage therapy department and craniocervical therapist Kathleen Aragon.

Aragon, who lives in West Bend, is a registered occupational therapist who works in the Mayville school system. She discovered the benefits of craniocervical therapy a number of years ago when she went through several sessions herself.

"I found it to be a real benefit to me. My body feels more aligned and I feel healthier," said Aragon, who studied through the John Upledger Institute to learn and practice the technique.

In her work at St. Joseph's, Aragon performs craniocervical therapy to treat chronic pain and conditions such as arthritis, fibromyalgia, headaches, TMJ (jaw) pain/dysfunction, and whiplash. Working with special education students in the schools, she has found it helpful to some children with learning disabilities or autism.

Craniocervical (cranio-head; sacral-tailbone) therapy uses a light touch to the bones and membranes of the head, spinal column and entire body as a way to encourage the natural release and relaxation of connective tissues. The therapist's trained hands detect motion in cerebrospinal fluid and imbalances in the craniocervical system. They work to improve neurological communication by restoring the spinal pulse to a balanced level.

Craniocervical fluid surrounds the brain and spinal cord and is held in place by an outer layer of membrane called the dura mater. As the fluid goes around the brain and down the spinal column it has a rhythm, just as blood flow has a rhythm. The therapist is trained to detect and treat this rhythm, Aragon explained.

What is a craniocervical therapy session like?

The person lies on a table on their back. You keep all your clothes on, with the exception of shoes. Earrings, glasses and belts are removed. It's better to wear loose-fitting clothes. I usually start at the feet and begin to feel for the craniocervical rhythm. I then work along up the body, with one hand on each side of the body, front and back," Aragon said.

"As I work, I can feel the tissue soften and release."

She uses light pressure, working through the clothes. Working up the body and then on different places on the head, the therapist is able to loosen the membranes and get the fluid to flow more freely.

"The pressure is very soft," Aragon noted. "The amount of pressure is five grams — it's like holding a nickel in your hands."

What is the experience like?
"An overall sense of well-being," said Aragon. "And sometimes the

Craniocervical therapy relatively new technique

Craniocervical therapy is a relatively new technique. It was originally developed in the early 1900s by an osteopath named William G. Sutherland, who thought that in order for the brain and central nervous system to function properly, the bones of the skull must move slightly. Later, John Upledger, also an osteopath, studied Sutherland's work and continued to look at the anatomy of the central nervous system, postulating that there was indeed cranial motion.

Upledger formulated a protocol of therapist hand positions that would check for cranial and spinal motion and would monitor and treat the natural rhythmic process of cerebral spinal fluid as it moves through the central nervous system. Depending on the age and development of the individual, this rhythmic process occurs between six and 12 cycles per minute.

Upledger began research in cranial motion in 1975 in the Department of Biomechanics of the Osteopathic college at Michigan State University, where he was a clinician-researcher and professor.

His Upledger Institute and Foundation provides education for medical doctors, osteopaths, chiropractors, dentists, physical therapists, occupational therapists and massage practitioners who incorporate craniocervical therapy into their practices.

(feeling can be emotional too, because we have memories in our tissues. If an area has been restricted, you may feel like crying. In releasing the membranes, you are freeing up your energy to do other things."

While the process is often deeply relaxing, after a treatment there may be some soreness as tight tissues begin to loosen. Aragon said craniocervical therapy is a very individual treatment and may not be for everyone.

"I am not healing the body but rather facilitating the healing within the body, so the number of sessions needed to heal depends on the problems and how the body is processing the work. Some problems are more deeply entrenched in the system," said Aragon.

She said she enjoys the satisfaction the work brings for her and for those she sees: "It's really uplifting for me. It feels good to be doing this work."

More information about craniocervical therapy and scheduling a therapy session is available by calling St. Joseph's Community Hospital's massage therapy department at 334-8585.

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Kathleen Aragon, a craniocervical therapist, begins treatment at the feet of patient Karen Ramsey. (Staff photo: Patrick Roe)

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