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Dimitri Schauburg

AquaCranial Therapy: A Spa Treatment for the Adventurous Soul

by Courtney Mather

On the spa menu at the Four Seasons Resort & Spa on Maui, AquaCranial Therapy is listed as a specialty treatment along with Ayurvedic massage, Thai massage and Hawaiian temple lomilomi. For those who have experienced this technique, however, it may seem appropriate to also list it with outdoor adventure activities such as scuba diving, windsurfing, bike tours on the volcano and crater hikes. It's not the typical private ocean-side resort massage experience one might expect. Rather, it's an adventure into the greatest wilderness of Hawaii: the ocean.

AquaCranial Therapy is a water-based therapy developed by Rebecca Goff of Maui. Goff, a licensed massage therapist and a certified marine-mammal naturalist, developed AquaCranial Therapy by combining lessons learned from studying the behavior and movement of dolphins and whales with CranioSacral Therapy (CST), the model of craniosacral manipulation developed by John Upledger, D.O.

CST uses precise, gentle touch to improve the circulation of cerebrospinal fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord, thereby improving the functioning of the central nervous system. The practitioner applies gentle pres-

sure to the bones of the skull and along the length of the spine, and then allows the body's natural healing processes to take over. In AquaCranial Therapy, the movement of waves and gentle currents accentuate the CST manipulations.

The profound impact of this therapy has raised much interest among spa therapists wishing to offer their clients the newest, most interesting techniques. AquaCranial Therapy is increasingly being offered in resorts around the country: throughout the Hawaiian Islands, in the swanky ski resort community of Sun Valley, Idaho, in Florida, and in Maine.

Learning from dolphins and whales

Goff has studied dolphins for 15 years, and has been integrating what she's learned of their movement and behavior, in and out of the water, into AquaCranial Therapy for six years.

Goff explains, "When a whale or dolphin beaches, for example, they lose their equilibrium. They are used to swimming with currents and waves in the water, so on land they end up with an imbalance in the liquid of the inner ear. Rocking them back and forth helps them regain their equilibrium."

For whales, this rocking also reduces muscle stiffness and balances the circulatory system. Goff says that when they are rocked gently in the water, human beings receive similar benefits.

Goff said that marine animals frequently come into the treatment area during deep-water sessions, and occasionally during the shallow-water sessions. She said that dolphins have shown her how to work with a client by coming up and touching the client's body during a session. "Once they came up and pushed on the bottom of someone's feet. So we learned to take the reflex points on the bottom of the feet and then push the client through the water just like the dolphins push with their noses," she said.

Using the lessons culled from these cetacean friends, along with yoga poses, meridian work, and CST, Goff says that she is able to increase the mobility of the recipient's craniosacral system and facilitate releases in the spine.

The treatment

I had the good fortune of experiencing an AquaCranial session with Goff. She greeted me early one morning with a knowing look and a compassionate nod, commenting, "A bit of stress for a Maui girl, eh?" What

transpired over the 25-minute session still confounds me. I remember feeling stressed about accumulating voice-mail messages and looming deadlines as I climbed into a wetsuit. I recall walking into the water, resting back into a neck pillow, floating easily and feeling safe and supported. I

AquaCranial Therapy has had a healing effect for individuals with high levels of stress, chronic pain, frequent headaches, sleep apnea and other sleep disorders, chronic-fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia.

still recall how I was cradled, rocked and gently guided through the water with gentle pressure being applied along certain points. But after the session, I somehow lost all conception of deadlines and messages, and ended up curled up like an infant in a bed of lava rock next to the sea. There I lay for what seemed like hours in a waking dream while experiencing a timelessness I had never imagined possible.

Benefits as a therapy

AquaCranial is a fairly new modality, so its therapeutic value has yet to

be researched and documented. However, Goff said that she has found the therapy to have a profound healing effect for individuals with high levels of stress, chronic pain, frequent headaches, sleep apnea and other sleep disorders, chronic-fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia. She has helped children with autism, attention-deficit disorder and immune-system problems, and she has assisted women experiencing difficult pregnancies and those healing from difficult childbirths.*

AquaCranial Therapy has also helped many clients release phobias, even fears of water or the ocean. "People who have been traumatized by the water have come here specifically to heal this," Goff said.

AquaCranial Therapy client Barbara Brookins of San Francisco, California, is one such client. Her fear of the water was so great that during her first session of AquaCranial Therapy she required two extra people to be in the water to support her. (Typically only the therapist and the client are in the water together.) But then something changed.

"I began to feel safe, and I was able to relax. I went into this blissful state," Brookins recalls. "Two or three days later I actually went down to the ocean and floated on my back alone! I never would have done that voluntarily before."

Goff also recommends AquaCranial Therapy as a bonding experience for husbands and wives. "We will have them floating next to one another in the ocean and bring them very close together without touching just to bring their energetic fields together," she says. "Afterwards they will swear they touched, because they can really feel their spouse."

At the spa

Andrea Schaub works at the front desk of the spa at Four Seasons Resort. She will typically recommend AquaCranial Therapy to hotel guests

who are already familiar with CST or other forms of bodywork. "Or," she says, "those that have an adventurous spirit and are just ready to go for it."

"This is a service that definitely needs the mind to be open so that the body can be open," she adds.

A massage therapist herself, Schaub always tells guests, "Let go of the body, know that you will be supported and taken care of. In your mind you might think that you want to have this and that fixed. But that is not how the body works. It has a higher intelligence."

She adds that everyone's experience will be different. "One person could have an intense, profound experience where they see colors and lights and go places," she says. "Other people just feel very calm, as if they have reached a meditative state without actually sitting to meditate."

In the winter and on days when the ocean is rough or the weather is stormy, the sessions are held in a pool or hot tub. Dechen Goode, a therapist at the spa since 1991, says that she prefers the outdoor hydrotherapy experience. "A warm ocean environment is best. The salt helps you float, there is the rhythm of the waves—you just let go in the ocean," she says. Goode says that the next best place for AquaCranial Therapy would be naturally heated hot springs that are big enough to move clients around.

Therapists speak

Madir Scolponi, an AquaCranial therapist who also works at the Four Seasons' spa, says that clients are always amazed with the altered state they experience after the session. Before the session, she says, they might think, "OK, I am going to float in the ocean for 25 minutes. What is the big deal about that?" Then, she says, "Between floating in the ocean, feeling

Therapists: (l-r) Signy Erickson, D.C., Avadhan Carson, C.Ac., C.M.T., and Ray Mercurio, C.M.T., perform AquaCranial Therapy on Natalie Woolfendale at the Dolphin Research Center in the Florida Keys.



Alcan Bybee, The Upcogger Institute, Inc.

safe, and the [CST] techniques used on them, they reach a state they never expected."

Goff explains what may cause this altered state: "Imagine you have a garden hose and you bend it in half so that the water doesn't come through any more ... a person may have restrictions in their spine or cranium from slipping as a child ice skating or [from] a fall while skiing, all the while thinking it was no big deal. When we release these restrictions, we unbend the hose. There is much more of a flow of fluid in the [craniosacral] system, so all of a sudden they are much more relaxed than they are used to being."

Goode says that clients sometimes report that they wanted to weep during a session. "It's a very sensuous sensory experience," she says. "For people who are not used to relaxing in the water, when they go into this womblike environment, floating in the ocean and being supported and held in a very gentle way, there is something very deeply therapeutic about it."

Client feedback

Aoy Austin, of Los Angeles, California, is a seasoned bodywork recipient. After her first AquaCranial Therapy session on a recent trip to Maui, she immediately booked four more.

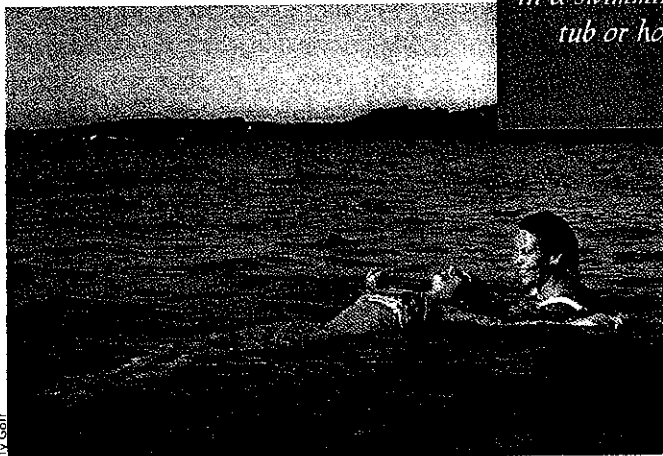
Austin says that from the work she experienced prolonged relief from chronic back pain she attributes to a "sway back."

"After most regular treatments you feel good for a day or two after. This treatment lasted for several weeks," she said.

James Waslaski, an author and international lecturer on chronic pain and sports injuries, received an AquaCranial session while he was in Maui to teach a seminar on orthopedic massage.

"For about the next day and a half, I had so much calmness," he said. "I saw things I never noticed before:

Developed in Hawaii, AquaCranial Therapy is usually conducted in the ocean; however, it can also be performed in a swimming pool, hot tub or hot spring.



By Goff



AquaCranial Therapy developer Rebecca Goff has used the technique to assist postpartum women. She says it has also helped children with autism, attention-deficit disorder and immune-system problems.

the clarity of the sun, the sunset, the clouds, birds flying over, sounds. Everything was so different and so bizarre, but it was all very peaceful. It changes your proprioception; it changes your equilibrium.

"What was amazing was that I had a lot of memories of childhood through adulthood that just flashed by," he added. "It was almost like a life experience of memories that accumulated into the most calming state I can say I ever experienced before in my life." He adds, "The interesting thing is that I'm not an energy worker. I am very clinical. I work on muscles and tendons and ligaments and bones and structure and pain management. But this experience opened me up to a whole new healing arena."

Courtney Mather is a free-lance writer living in Hawaii on the island of Maui. Her articles have appeared in several national periodicals, including Healing Lifestyles & Spas and Triathlete.



To Learn More ...

AquaCranial Therapy developer Rebecca Goff offers three levels of training on Maui and in the Bahamas: beginning, advanced techniques, and deep-water training. Workshops are available for spas as well as for individuals.

1. Beginning

Prerequisites include a basic understanding of CranioSacral Therapy and a love of the water. "I would say that people who have an affinity to the ocean, training in [CST], and who enjoy helping people to relax and heal would be a natural for it," says AquaCranial Therapist Dechen Goode.

2. Advanced Techniques

Before attending this level, Goff recommends that students have been exposed to some degree of shamanic or visionary training (being able to track a person's emotional state from the outside), as well as emotional-release training.

3. Deep-Water Training

Students work on people with a support crew in water 100-feet deep. "When you are in 100 feet of water, it has a wildness to it. The deeper water takes you deeper into your own psyche ... knowing that anything can be out in the water with you, as well as actually sensing what is out there," Goff explained.

AquaCranial Therapy contact information:

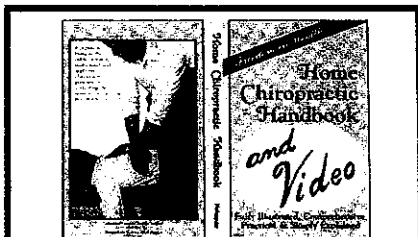
Four Seasons Resort Maui

(808) 874-8000 for the hotel or (808) 874-2925 for the spa. A 25-minute session costs \$105. Guests of the hotel are given priority.

Rebecca Goff

Available for private appointments and trainings. She also offers free clinics at least once a month that are open to both children and pregnant mothers. Visit www.AquaCranial.com, or contact Cetacea Bleu at (808) 879-0963 or cetaceableu@msn.com for more information.

—Courtney Mather



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