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It's a wrap

Research into human fascia rapidly gains attention

By ANN MARIE MCQUEEN

It is literally what holds us together, a sinewy system binding our muscles to our bones, wrapping everything from our nerves to our brain in a subtle casing of connective tissue.

Yet in mainstream medicine, fascia -- which can most simply be compared to the casing and links holding a string of sausages together -- has rarely been pondered or studied.

That is changing rapidly.

On Thursday, Oprah contributor Dr. Mehmet Oz will have his fascia manipulated in a process known as Rolfing. In October, top scientists and bodyworkers will gather at the Harvard Medical School for the first International Fascia Research Congress.

And fascia is already set to be one of the buzzwards at The Yoga Conference, kicking off Thursday at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. That's because those in the yoga community say it helps explain why stretching one part of the body in a simple yoga pose can make an unrelated area feel so good.

NEW APPROACH

"Listen, I agree pulling my legs apart and twisting to the side is strange," says conference director Ruth Dargan. "And we should all be inquiring as to why we do it. I'm making it as prominent as I can. It's new. It's definitely a new approach for the yoga community."

Back in the 1930s Dr. Ida Rolf -- also an early yoga enthusiast -- began manipulating the body's network of connective tissue to ease discomfort and improve alignment. Rolf would develop a series of structural integration treatments which still bear her name. Using thumbs, fingers and elbows, "Rolfers" manipulate the tissue under the skin, throughout the entire body, over 10 separate sessions. Practitioners say in doing so they can alleviate pain and discomfort from all sorts of stress and trauma, physical and emotional.

POISE AND POWER

In the March issue of Vogue, writer Heidi Julavuts described coming away from a Rolfing experience with greater poise and power, summing the experience up like this: "I'm sold. Like yoga, Rolfing is one of those practices that your body instantly tells you makes a lot of sense."

In his 2000 book Anatomy Trains, leading Rolfer Thomas Myers described his view that fascia is organized into a series of meridians and regular daily living can throw them out of balance in a variety of ways.

Myers explained that as a myopic child, he regularly stuck his head forward to see better. The gesture became a habit, something Rolfers believe would be felt in his fascia as well as his muscles.

The medical community, often criticized for viewing the body as a series of parts rather than a dynamic whole, has been slow to catch on to the idea.

"It's not been studied as a system, because it's the stuff everyone's been trying to get out of the way," says Myers. "So it's the stuff that's been cut, it's the stuff that's been thrown away, 'let's get this out of here so we can get to the heart, let's get this stuff out of the way so we can get to the nerves.' But in fact, everything's wrapped in it."

Things have changed in the seven years since Anatomy Trains was published, said Myers.

He travels frequently teaching KMI, his brand of structural integration. The concept is being adapted by everyone from massage therapists to osteopaths and physiatrists, and estimates have some 3,000 structural integration practitioners working throughout the world. There are more than 60 such body workers registered with professional organizations in Canada.

SKEPTICISM

The idea that a body worker could simply look at a person and tell what needs to be moved to improve their well-being is still greeted with a fair amount of skepticism in the medical community, says Thomas Findley, a medical doctor and Rolfer, co-director for the Centre of Healthcare Knowledge Management at the East Orange Veterans Administration Medical Centre, and a main Fascia Congress organizer.

Rolfing was one of the techniques Findley used to help get paralysed actor Christopher Reeve off his respirator,

yet he estimates scientists know just 2% of what there is yet to learn about it.

Those in the field say getting 15 of the fascia world's top scientists together with a bunch of fascia-devoted Rolfers next fall in Boston is a very good start to changing that. The three-day set of sessions will gather together the disparate work that is now being done and help chart a course for the future.

Fascia's role in cancer transmission and the effect of damaging it in surgery are just two examples of areas needing research, though experts say the implications of future scientific study can only be imagined.

"It's all the way down into the cells," said Findley. "This kind of structure is the way our bodies are made."