ALTERNATIVE & COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE

Tui na puts a little oomph into massage

By IN-SUNG YOO
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When Brian C. Allen performs the energetic Chinese massage therapy known as tui na, it can be difficult to tell whether he's trying to loosen up his client's painful muscles or grind them into oblivion.

Tui na (pronounced "twee nah") can be quite vigorous, especially for people accustomed to the more relaxing Western styles of massage. But it can be toned down for the frail, very young and old, said Allen, owner of Oriental Medicine and Health Services in Claymont, which opened in February.

"It can be quite intense," he said. "It's very task-oriented, but it can also be quite relaxing."

In Chinese, tui na literally means "push pull," referring to two of the primary techniques used in the therapy. But the massage also can include other techniques. Some involve applying pressure with a rolling motion of the elbows and forearms, while others use a finger to dig into the skin to stimulate acupressure points.

In tui na massage therapy, practitioners might use their fingers to stimulate acupressure points.

There are similarities to Western massage, but Allen said the long history of study behind tui na – which can be traced as far back as 2300 B.C. – sets it apart. Though scientific research is lacking, proponents of tui na say the therapy's targeted approach to treating health problems makes it different than more general forms of relaxative massage.

"It's much more comprehensive than other kinds of massage," Allen said.

Tui na is one of the primary offerings of the health philosophies that make up traditional Chinese medicine. It's similar to the well-known therapies of acupuncture and acupressure in that it seeks to balance the flow of what traditional practitioners call chi (pronounced "chee"), or "vital energy." It accomplishes this through a combination of muscle manipulation and stimulation of specific points along the energy pathways called "meridians." Practitioners of Asian medicine believe illness and pain often occur when energy is stagnating along those pathways.

Most of Allen's clients seeking tui na come in with musculo-skeletal pain. Allen said it also can be used to treat a range of respiratory, digestive and even fertility issues, though there is little data to back up such claims.

While the existence of chi is not scientifically verifiable, it is known that stimulation of acupoints with needles can elicit a specific response from the body, said Ted Kaptchuk, assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. It's possible that stimulation of those points with the hands can have a comparable effect.

Kaptchuk said patients should have realistic expectations of therapies like tui na. But, he said, massage generally isn't dangerous and people clearly derive physical relief from it.

"I think the question of its legitimacy is independent of science," Kaptchuk said. "Its scientific legitimacy is totally a question of science. But personal acceptability for patients is something where the main issue is safety."

A licensed holistic health-care practitioner in California (Delaware has no such license), Allen was trained at the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, where he earned his master's degree in traditional oriental medicine. At the college, Allen was trained in the use of Chinese herbs, acupuncture and oriental massage, but also received 800 hours of training in anatomy, physiology and medical terminology.

That knowledge helps him work with doctors and identify clients who may have severe health problems better suited to treatment with drugs or surgery. Unlike some devotees of Asian medicine, Allen doesn't subscribe to the view that severe diseases like cancer should be treated with traditional medicine alone.

"You try to take the best of both worlds for the benefit of the patient," Allen said.

James Peterson, 37, of Greenville, was first introduced to tui na through his lifelong involvement with Asian martial arts. The practice of the massage therapy has close ties to traditional forms of kung fu, and Peterson had an instructor who used basic tui na techniques to treat injuries incurred through sparring. Peterson has had back, neck and arm pain treated with tui na, and has made the therapy his first line of treatment when it comes to sports-related injuries.

Peterson believes in the principles of chi, but doesn't think they're the sole reason behind the benefits of tui na. And while some people may lump tui na in with therapies that try to manipulate life energy for therapeutic purpose, he finds comparisons to things such as reiki, the "healing touch" therapy, unfair, since tui na involves actual manipulation of the muscles.

"I guess the proof is in the pudding," he said. "You have to go ahead and try it before you can understand the benefit of it."

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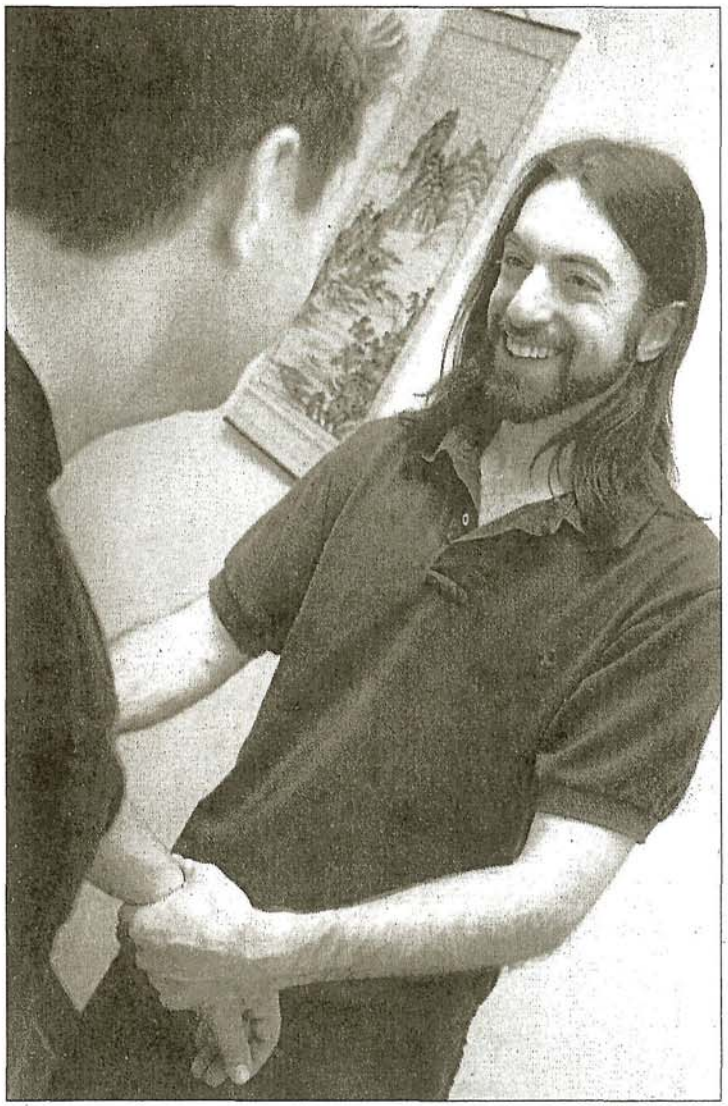

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Brian C. Allen is a practitioner of the Chinese massage therapy known as tui na. "It's very task-oriented, but it can also be quite relaxing," he says.

ABOUT TUI NA

Tui na (pronounced "twee nah") is a Chinese massage therapy that utilizes soft tissue manipulation, acupoints and structural realignment to treat a variety of musculo-skeletal and internal organ disorders.

The therapy seeks to normalize the flow of "vital energy," or chi (pronounced "chee"), in the body. Practitioners use a variety of styles: Some focus on pain and involve manipulation of large muscle groups, while others focus on treating internal illness through stimulation of acupressure points.

Though practitioners recommend tui na to treat a wide range of diseases and disorders, there's little scientific evidence to prove its effectiveness.

SOURCE: AMERICAN ORGANIZATION FOR BODYWORK THERAPIES OF ASIA