

# A healing energy?

## Now in hospitals, Reiki musters critics and fans

Syracuse, NY -- A controversial healing therapy touted by some as an almost magical stress reliever and dismissed by others as quackery is going mainstream at some Syracuse hospitals.

Reiki, a form of energy healing, is being offered by a growing number of nurses, chaplains and other staffers at Crouse, Upstate University and the VA Medical Center. About 15 percent of hospitals nationwide -- including the Cleveland Clinic, Children's Hospital in Boston and Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore -- provide Reiki.

Developed in Japan, Reiki is based on the idea that there is a universal life energy that supports the body's healing abilities. A Reiki practitioner supposedly becomes a conduit for this energy. During a treatment, a practitioner puts his or her hands on, or just above, several parts of a fully-clothed patient's body.

"That energy is going through me to the patient," said Joyce Appel, a registered nurse and Reiki practitioner at Crouse. "I know it sounds strange."

Reiki is considered a spiritual practice not linked to any specific religion.

There's no conclusive scientific evidence Reiki works. But Reiki proponents point to anecdotal evidence that suggests it eases stress, relieves pain and can improve a person's overall sense of well-being. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a division of the National Institutes of Health, says Reiki appears to be generally safe and no serious side effects have been reported. It also says more than 2.2 million U.S. adults have used it.

Among Reiki's fans are cardiac surgeon and TV show host Dr. Mehmet Oz, who recently urged viewers to try it. "This alternative medicine treatment can manipulate your energy and cure what ails you," he said on his program.

Critics, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, say Reiki is bunk. The bishops issued guidelines last year saying Catholic hospitals and other facilities should not offer it.

"... a Catholic who puts his or her trust in Reiki would be operating in the realm of superstition, the no-man's-land that is neither faith nor science," the bishops said in a statement.

St. Joseph's Hospital Health Care Center in Syracuse, a Catholic hospital, used to offer Reiki in its palliative care unit for dying patients. It stopped providing it after an employee trained in Reiki left the hospital, according to Denise Robertson, a hospital spokeswoman. The discontinuation of Reiki was unrelated to the bishops' statement, she said.

Another Reiki skeptic is Dr. Val Jones, president and CEO of Better Health, a health information Web site, and former medical director of the medical Web site Revolution Health. The physician calls Reiki "fake science" and says it has no place in hospitals.

"I think it's wrong to leverage your brand and trust to offer therapies that are not scientific," Jones said. "Having it available in the hospital makes it seem to the patient who is not educated that this is a legitimate therapy that will do them some good."

Local hospitals say they don't use Reiki as a substitute for conventional medical treatments,



Crouse Hospital patient Robert Blumenthal of Syracuse (center) is receiving a Reiki treatment in his room from two Reiki masters. Sue Maule (left) and Joyce Appel, RN (right).

but offer it as a complementary service. Health insurance does not pay for Reiki so Crouse and Upstate offer it free. The VA provides Reiki to some patients in its pain clinic and includes it as part of a regular exam.

Dr. Scott Treatman, Crouse's director of employee health, said Crouse's patient surveys suggest Reiki helps patients.

Crouse surveyed 390 patients who received Reiki between January, 2008, and December, 2009. Patients were asked to rank their stress levels before and after treatments on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being no stress and 5 being high stress. They also ranked their pain before and after treatments. The average patient's stress score was 2.77 before Reiki and .97 after Reiki. The average patient's pain score was .99 before Reiki and .78 after.

"The evidence, although it's not in peer-reviewed journals,

speaks for itself," Treatman said. "We're not only in the business of yanking out gallbladders, but also making the patients' experience here more comfortable."

Michael North, a chronic pain patient at the VA Medical Center, swears by Reiki.

North, 54, of Tully, suffers from pain related to lower back and neck problems. The U.S. Coast Guard veteran has had three surgeries over the past 24 years.

North has tried painkillers, but they don't help. He said he has a hard time relaxing. North said Reiki is the only thing that eases his anxiety. He got his first treatment in 2001 from Nancy J. Barnum, a nurse practitioner in the VA's pain clinic.

"Within a matter of minutes after barely touching my forehead, all of a sudden it felt like every problem just flushed out of me," North said. "I couldn't believe



David Lassman / The Post-Standard

Crouse Hospital patient Robert Blumenthal of Syracuse is receiving a Reiki treatment in his room from two Reiki masters. The hands in this picture belong to Reiki master Joyce Appel, RN.

it.”

Barnum said learning how to relax is a key strategy for chronic pain patients like North. Medication, behavioral therapy and other relaxation techniques don't work for some patients. For those people, alternatives like Reiki are sometimes more helpful, she said.

“If you can help someone to manage their stress level and induce more of a relaxation re-

sponse, the pain becomes more bearable,” Barnum said.

Reiki, long available in the community from private practitioners and through some medical practices, is gaining more traction in hospitals. A few nurses began offering Reiki at Crouse seven years ago. As patient interest in the alternative therapy increased the hospital formalized the program. “Administration said, ‘If patients are benefiting from it, why would we not do it,’” said Bob Allen, a Crouse vice president.

Joyce Appel, an experienced Reiki teacher, or Reiki Master, coordinates the Reiki program at Crouse. She and 16

other Crouse employees trained in Reiki offer it on their own time to maternity, cancer and chemical dependency patients. The hospital hopes to expand the program so it can make the therapy available to even more patients.

Upstate has trained about 30 staff members to offer Reiki to patients.

“We can't handle all the requests we are getting,” said Rev.

Louise Tallman Shepherd, a pediatric chaplain and Reiki Master at Upstate.

She and Sue Karl, a certified child life specialist and Reiki Master, provide Reiki to hospitalized children.

One of them was a school-age child with a history of psychiatric illness who was awake for three days before she was admitted. At the hospital, the child could not sleep, even though she had been given sedatives.

Shepherd and Karl spoke with the child's parents and received their permission to try Reiki. After treating the child for nearly an hour, the youngster fell asleep for 15 hours and was discharged the next day, according to Shepherd and Karl.

“The parents were very relieved,” Shepherd said.

There is no formal regulation of training and certification of Reiki practitioners. That has created a credibility problem for Reiki, according to Pamela Miles, a Reiki Master and author from New York City.

“Practitioners are all over the board, literally from people clicking on a Web site and considering themselves to be Reiki Masters to people who've gone through many years of training,” Miles said. “It's really a buyer

beware market.”

She recommends consumers ask practitioners if they have been trained in person by a Reiki Master. Miles also said consumers should ask practitioners about their clinical experience, their fees and -- most importantly -- whether the provider practices Reiki-self treatment every day.

Crouse and Upstate check out employees' credentials and training before allowing them to provide Reiki to patients.

Barnum of the VA said more hospitals are offering Reiki because patients are demanding alternatives.

“You get sick of people throwing a pill at the problem all the time, especially if they are not helpful and you are dealing with side effects,” she said.

Reiki also provides hospitals a way to reestablish a physical connection with patients, something that is vanishing as hospitals become more high tech, she said.

“It's easy for people to feel like the last four digits of their Social Security number or the liver in room 538,” Barnum said. “Things like Reiki can make it less impersonal.”

—James T. Mulder can be reached at 470-2245 or [jmulder@syracuse.com](mailto:jmulder@syracuse.com)