Integrative medicine mixes modern techniques with therapies, such as hand and foot massages, to heal the whole person.

INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE GAINS POPULARITY EXAMINING MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT

By Deborah Rutledge
Often when patients come in to see Drs. Steve and Sandi Amoils for one problem, they end up finding—and getting treated for—another one altogether.

Integrative medicine tends to work like that, uncovering related issues as it takes into account everything that’s going on with the patient—including the external factors that influence their lives and health.

The integrative approach examines the whole person—body, mind and spirit—and has been gaining traction for some time in Cincinnati as people discover how additional therapies may offer relief for such issues as chronic pain or fatigue, headaches or irritable bowel syndrome.

This comprehensive evaluation, which considers a person’s lifestyle, diet, stress or pain level, exercise habits, medications and supplements, often helps to get to the root of health problems. Sandi calls it “looking under the hood.”

“When we treat [a patient], we’re always treating the whole person,” says Steve of the practice he and Sandi co-direct, the Alliance Institute for Integrative Medicine in Kenwood.

“We want to know a patient’s story,” Sandi adds, noting that background information is helpful to know because “disease doesn’t happen overnight.”

After taking this big-picture inventory, the integrative approach then treats issues by combining the best of modern scientific medicine with complementary therapies like acupuncture, massage, energy healing, Rolfing and chiropractic.

Making use of therapeutic partnerships helps to treat and prevent health problems, as well as improve overall health. The basis remains medical, Steve says. People are realizing these therapies are not meant to replace medical treatment, but to enhance, which may explain their reduced skepticism for integrative medicine.

SYSTEMS, NOT SILOS
It makes sense to consider the whole person in order to figure out what’s going on with their health, the Amoils say, because people’s systems are interconnected, designed to work together; what misfires in one area affects another.

But traditionally, medicine organizes itself around silos, sorting physicians into medical specialties so that people’s health problems are treated only within that category, like cardiology, immunology or orthopedics, for example.

The Amoils call what they do “transformational medicine” because it leads patients to optimize their health and make them more resilient to illnesses that may crop up. They realized their patients’ whole lives were turning around for the better, affecting all aspects of their well-being—especially when a health crisis brought them to integrative medicine.

“We want to empower patients to take control of their health and the personalization of their care,” Steve says.

PERSONALIZATION IS KEY
As oncologists have noted, treatment of cancer has been found to be effective using a personalized approach. Similarly, the medical community has found the idea of integrative medicine works on a person-by-person basis.
“Different therapies work for different people,” says Dr. Brian Mannion, executive medical director of oncology at The Christ Hospital Health Network.

Beyond chemotherapy and radiation, patients there have access to yoga, Tai Chi, medical hand and foot massage, nutritional support, music and healing program, pet therapy, and more.

THE OPPOSITE OF STERILE
The Alliance Institute for Integrative Medicine doesn’t look like a typical medical center. With a library, conference space, gift shop and empty waiting room (designed to not keep people waiting), it is a calming spot.

The examination rooms are similarly not the typical spare white rooms, but decorated to soothe. If a patient comes in with a headache, for example, they are not permitted to leave until the pain is gone.

PATIENT-DRIVEN
Other practitioners around town have developed their use of integrative medicine, in some cases sprouting from patient demand. The Christ Hospital is a good example, particularly for its oncology department. Nurses and doctors heard what patients were saying, or asking to receive as they underwent cancer treatment.

To that end, Christ Hospital is in the midst of renovating their Cancer Center so patients’ experience will be enhanced, says Connie Cook, director of the Cancer Center at The Christ Hospital. In the new infusion area, which used to be a big room with many chairs, patients will have “neighborhoods” where they can get their treatments.

These are made up of nooks and crannies that will accommodate small groups or one or two people, as the patient prefers. Or they can choose a single-person alcove, Dr. Mannion says.

A new all-purpose activity room will accommodate classes on nutrition plus Tai Chi and yoga. All have become popular, especially when patients hit “survivorship mode,” Cook says.

Patients at this point may be feeling a little vulnerable after traditional treatments and regular appointments end. They may be feeling the delayed effects of radiation and chemo, and find these therapies help them manage emotional distress, Cook says.

“A lot of what we do is to improve patient experience, their emotions and well-being at a very stressful time,” says Dr. Mannion. “It makes them feel more in control.

“Certainly recovery from acute episodes seems to be faster,” he adds.

Oncology patient Cecile Walsh can attest to that. After the disease recurred for her in 2006, upping the level to stage 4 metastatic breast cancer, Cecile really took to the additional therapies available at Christ.

“The nurses were very good about knowing what was important to me,” Cecile says of the environment when she came in for treatment.

Some people like a peaceful atmosphere, quiet, no TV, doors shut, but perhaps with music. Now on a regimen to receive an IV drug every three weeks, Cecile believes the hand and foot massage therapy she receives at the same time as her treatment helps her body to get the most out of the medicine.

“It’s been outstanding,” she says of the massage therapy. “It relaxes me, thus I feel you’re more open to the chemicals when your spirit is relaxed, too.

“I totally believe that integrative medicine and a holistic approach to cancer assists in the effectiveness of these drugs.”

THE BETTER QUESTION TO ASK
To improve overall health, “as an educated consumer, you have to figure out where and how to use these therapies,” Steve says.

Some may benefit from regular visits to the chiropractor, if, say, their work taxes their posture, by hunching over a keyboard.

He adds that people will go a long way on their own by examining their lifestyle, improving their diet and sleep patterns and adding such things as stretching and yoga, which they can access inexpensively on their computers.