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Tai Chi hits medical mainstream

By Shelley Zarudenc and Ciara Byrne

A centuries old martial art, historically known for its therapeutic powers, is now making its way into the medical mainstream with one of the first Tai Chi programs for patients in a Toronto hospital.

Mount Sinai Hospital will offer the Medical Tai Chi classes to patients coping with chronic pain, said Dr. Philip Peng, an anaesthesiologist and pain specialist with the Hospital's Wasser Pain Management Centre. Long believed by practitioners to improve balance, focus and a "mind-body connection," researchers are now discovering the medical benefits of Tai Chi for patients coping with various conditions and suffering with pain.

But Medical Tai Chi differs from the typical images of people in parks or community centres slowly transitioning from one fluid pose to the next. Medical Tai Chi is more than just a movement.

"It's like holding a ball," said Dr. Peng, as he stood in his office and carefully lifted his arms up to hold an invisible ball, gently moving it up and down. As a movement on its own, the action does very little to engage the mind or body, Dr. Peng explained.

Now imagine that the ball is made of glass — it has weight, and if you drop it, it will break — now the mind is focused and engaged, which makes the movement cognitive, said Dr. Peng. Finally, he added, by focusing on breathing while practicing the movement, "a mind-body connection synchronized with breathing" occurs.

Ultimately, it's this mind-body connection that helps ease a patient's pain.

"Pain is a subjective emotional experience," said Dr. Peng, adding the goal of the Medical Tai Chi program isn't necessarily to decrease the amount of pain that a patient experiences, but rather to increase their cognitive ability to handle pain.

"We are not just talking about movement, but also the cognitive element," said Dr. Peng. "We want to emphasize it's about more than just movement."

The combination of traditional Chinese art with Western medicine caused a flurry of excitement in 2010. A number of recent studies have shown that Tai Chi has been more effective than medication alone in the treatment of patients with fibromyalgia and osteoarthritis.

For example, while exercise is an important part of pain management, physical exertion is challenging for people dealing with fibromyalgia. The gentle aerobic movements of Tai Chi allow patients to move at their own pace. The exercise also helps improve mood and reduce stress, both of which play a role in managing and reducing pain.

The success of Medical Tai Chi in the treatment of fibromyalgia and osteoarthritis suggests the practice will benefit anyone who is suffering from pain due to any number of illnesses and conditions. Tai Chi could also help patients with neurological conditions, said Dr. Peng.

Dr. Peng has practiced Tai Chi for 16 years, having learned the art form from his father. He, along with Mount Sinai acupuncturist Dr. Adam Chen and instructors Daniel Chou and James Fu, have created a modified program for patients.

Tai Chi traditionally contains 103 movements, but Mount Sinai's version will be reduced to 24 to allow patients to complete a 12-week course. Additional courses will be offered after the initial program to allow patients to build upon the movements they have already learned.

Dr. Chen said patients feel comfortable with Tai Chi, because it gives them some ownership over their pain management. "Tai Chi is not invasive," said Dr. Chen. "We give patients a sense of self control, self-discipline and healing."

The Tai Chi classes begin February 17. Patients can contact Mount Sinai Hospital's Rehab and Wellbeing Centre to find out more information about the program. The cost of the program is \$150 for 12 classes or \$15 per class.

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Dr. Adam Chen demonstrates Tai Chi to Mount Sinai staff.

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