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BODYWORK

Qigong for the Heart

U. OF ARIZONA RECEIVES FEDERAL GRANT TO INVESTIGATE ANCIENT THERAPY

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According to the American Heart Association, some 2,500 heart transplant operations are performed in the United States each year. While technological advances have improved a person's chances of surviving a transplant and living a normal life, a shortage of donor organs has led to an alarmingly high number of people who need - but may not get -- transplants, with more than 25,000 people currently on hospital waiting lists awaiting a replacement heart.

For these unfortunate people, who must effectively wait for someone else to die so that they may have a chance to live, life can become unbearable. Patients awaiting transplants are often kept alive using artificial hearts or mechanical devices that assist their own hearts, which can lead to severe depression, anxiety, hypertension, increased stress and overall physical decline.

In an effort to soothe the feelings of despair and hopelessness that prospective transplant patients may suffer, the University of Arizona Medical Center has received a $380,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health to investigate the healing effects of qigong, an ancient Chinese therapy that combines exercise, meditation and breathing techniques.

"What makes this unique is combining the most modern medical technology with the most ancient of therapies," said Dr. Lorraine Manciet, an associate research scientist at the university who will head the two-year study. Between 30 and 40 patients will take part in the program, most of whom will have been sustained on artificial hearts or heart-assisting devices for three to four months.

Half of the heart patients will be trained in qigong movements, in addition to meditation and therapeutic breathing exercises. The other half will be trained in sham qigong movements that have no known therapeutic value. In addition to the movements, the study patients will continue to take part in an aerobic and strength training program required of all the medical center's mechanical heart patients.

During the study, patients will be blinded as to which group they are in; in other words, none of the patients will know whether they are using real or sham qigong movements until the program has ended. Researchers will document and evaluate the mental, emotional and physical condition of subjects throughout the course of the study to see if there is any benefit for the patients using authentic qigong.

The movements will be taught by Michael Roland, a licensed acupuncturist who has extensive training in the U.S. and China. According to Roland, the heart patients will perform won't be exactly the same as those used under normal conditions because of their ties to the heart assisting devices, some of which are bulky and extremely heavy.

"We had to design the qigong program for people tethered to a washing machine - for someone tied to an eight-foot hose," he said. "So it's a somewhat specialized regimen for them."

The reasons for choosing qigong were outlined in the university's grant proposal, which states, in part:

> "It is widely accepted by practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine that qigong improves blood circulation, improves strength and flexibility, reverses damage caused by prior injuries and disease, and promotes relaxation, awareness and healing · Clearly, a treatment strategy that can effectively increase the physical capacities of patients, while enhancing their quality of life, is desperately needed."

The proposal also notes that this need is expected to grow over time as people continue to live longer and as the shortage of donor organs increases.

The importance of using an ancient Eastern therapy to improve a patient's quality of life has not been lost on the center's Western practitioners. While some medical doctors are skeptical of qigong's healing properties, the study has received the full approval of Dr. Jack Copeland, the medical center's chief of cardiovascular and thoracic surgery, who performed the first heart transplant in the state in 1979.

"He's open to anything that has the potential to benefit these patients," remarked Paul Nolan, a doctor of pharmacology involved in the study. "His feeling is if there is anything at all that might help, do it."

Dr. Manciet apparently feels the same way. Although the number of people participating in her study is relatively small compared to the number of people awaiting heart transplants, she is optimistic that qigong can have a positive effect, and she envisions a day when it may be implemented at health care centers across the U.S.

"The therapy is designed to promoted health in any individual, and we expect it to do so in these patients, who are among the most stressed and depressed in the hospital," she said. "If it does, the plan is to enlarge the study - expand it to heart transplant centers throughout the country, even worldwide."

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