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Healing touch: A new patient outreach program

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Healing touch practitioners Karen Lynch and Paula Kobelt use the technique on Sheldon Smith at Grant Medical Center in Columbus, Ohio.

By [Phil Galewitz](#), Special for USA TODAY

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Susan Iliff was out of the hospital within four days after open-heart surgery and never needed any pain medication.

She credited her speedy, painless recovery not just to her doctors, but also to an unconventional type of therapy she received at Scripps Green Hospital in La Jolla, Calif.: a daily dose of healing touch therapy.

Every day, a nurse slowly guided her hands along Iliff's legs and feet and then lightly touched her elbows, wrists and forehead, stopping at each point for about a minute. By the end of the 30-minute session, Iliff would fall asleep in her hospital bed.

"It just put me into a deep state of relaxation," says Iliff, 58, a retired nurse who received the therapy in 2002 and 2005 at the hospital.

Scripps Green is one of at least 100 U.S. hospitals that have started offering the service in the past 15 years. Although there are no large clinical trials that prove its worth, hospitals offer healing touch based on strong anecdotal evidence that it works and the fact that there are no safety worries with this non-invasive procedure, says Diane Wardell, an associate professor of nursing at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston and a healing touch provider.

"Hospitals are being motivated by patients asking for complements to traditional care," Wardell says. "It's always a step forward for patients when alternative care is integrated into hospital settings."

Not just a rubdown

Healing touch is not a massage. Sometimes the practitioner's hands hover above the body and don't actually make contact. Healing touch is an "energy therapy" that uses gentle hand techniques purported to help re-pattern the patient's energy field and accelerate healing of the body and mind. It is based on the belief that people have fields of energy that are in constant interaction with the environment around them, Wardell says.

POPULAR, BUT UNPROVEN

Healing touch was developed by Janet Mentgen, a nurse who has used energy-based care in her practice in Colorado since 1980. Mentgen and some of her colleagues developed a training program that incorporated the techniques, which borrow concepts from ancient Asian healing traditions.

The National Institutes of Health classifies healing touch as a "biofield" therapy because its effects are thought to be a result of manipulation of energy fields around the body.

The NIH considers healing touch and other types of energy medicine "among the most controversial of complementary and alternative medicine practices because neither the external energy fields nor their therapeutic effects have been demonstrated convincingly by any biophysical means."

Nonetheless, NIH notes on its website that energy medicine is gaining popularity in the marketplace and is now being studied at several academic medical centers.

Results of those tests are still pending.

More than 86,000 nurses and other health professionals use healing touch in hospitals and in private practice, according to Healing Touch International, a non-profit Colorado-based group that certifies practitioners. Many hospitals offer the service at no extra cost—largely because insurance doesn't pay for it. Outside the hospital setting, healing touch costs about the same as a massage therapist — or between \$80 to \$100 an hour.

The limited studies suggest its effectiveness in a wide variety of conditions, including speeding wound healing following heart surgery, reducing the impact of osteoarthritis and migraine headaches, and reducing anxiety and depression for women undergoing radiation treatment for breast cancer.

At Scripps Green Hospital, healing touch is offered to all open-heart surgery patients. "This is so safe and there is no risk," says Erminia "Mimi" Guarneri, a cardiologist and medical director of Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine.

Guarneri became a believer in healing touch a decade ago when a viral infection knocked her out of work for the first time in years.

"After the treatment, I felt like I had so much energy and I felt better almost immediately," she says. "I felt if this can help me this much, it can help my patients."

Many concede that when they first heard about healing touch they thought it was weird. "I thought it looked a little kooky," says Karen Lynch, a pain management nurse at Grant Medical Center in Columbus, Ohio. That was her

reaction when she saw nurses provide the therapy in the hospital's coronary care unit.

But when Lynch showed up for work with abdominal pain a few years ago, she gave healing touch a shot. "In a few minutes, the pain was completely relieved," she says. "That's when I started wondering what was going on with this stuff and began getting trained in it."

Doctors support treatment

Lynch says most doctors don't fully understand how healing touch works, but they believe it when they see patients improve. "It's difficult for me to understand, but it works and there's nothing to lose, and it shows we are treating patients in a caring manner."

Arthur Katz, a heart surgeon in Boca Raton, Fla., says he's convinced healing touch has helped re-energize his patients who were struggling after surgery. "Every time I have used it on one of my patients, I have had a favorable outcome," he says. "The body is more than a machine. It has a mechanical component but also an emotional and psychological component and an energy component."

Last year, he did coronary bypass surgery on a woman in her mid-50s. Although the surgery went well, she was depressed after the procedure and was not motivated to get out of bed or to do other things to help her recovery.

"I tried everything I know. A firm approach, the nice-guy approach to encourage her, but nothing worked," Katz says. "After a healing touch session, she was like a different person with a smile on her face."

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