

H · e · a · l · t · h

Massage and prayer a ministry for Catholics

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

The stress was building, Sister Margaret Ann Lawson remembers. And it wasn't just coming from her work as an X-ray technician at Strong Memorial Hospital in the early 1980s.

She was facing a traumatic fight with cancer.

"Someone suggested I receive a massage," she recalled. Although the idea was new to her, the Mercy sister followed up on a referral.

"Having been through an illness, I think you are more open to whatever you might try," she said.

Her experience of a full-body massage proved positive — the antithesis of the trauma inflicted by surgery and chemotherapy.

"Another person is giving you the healing touch, when often your contact with another person is negative — they're poking you with needles or making an incision or putting toxic stuff into your body," she said.

The massage led Sister Lawson into an ancient — if underdocumented — field and into a new career. Since she already understood anatomy and how to position people's bodies for X-rays, she had a head start on becoming a good massage therapist. Next, she would teach her hands the time-honored strokes that are said to communicate through touch.

It helped to know that there was a massage therapist among the women religious at Stella Niagara in the Buffalo Diocese. Using that "a little leverage," she persuaded the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester to allow her to study massage.

In 1985 she studied for a year in California, then returned home, took the state exam and earned a license to perform massage therapy in New York, one of about 20 states that now require practitioners to be licensed.

Since then, Sister Lawson's regular clients have included women religious at Rochester's Spirit House, a residence offer-



Sister Margaret Ann Lawson, a licensed massage therapist for 10 years, practices massage for the benefits of relaxation, stress management and wellness.

Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

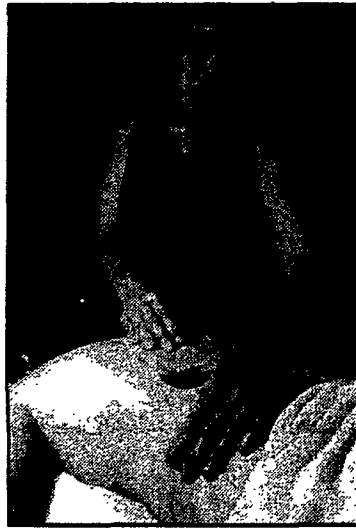
ing therapy primarily for women religious who are suffering from burnout.

Sister Lawson also has become a member of the National Association of Bodyworkers in Religious Service, which brings together more than 225 clergy, religious and lay people who view massage as a ministry.

In a telephone interview, the association's president, Gloria Ray Carpeneto of Baltimore, noted a growing professionalism promoted through associations such as her own and the American Medical Therapy Association; more licensing; and a new National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork. Interest is climbing, she said.

In greater Rochester, only a handful of therapists practiced massage in the mid-1980s; today the Yellow Pages list a full page. Yet some are reluctant to advertise out of concern that they will receive harassing phone calls from people interested in a massage of a different nature.

Sister Lawson and other licensed massage therapists interested in spirituality find their



Sister Lawson, a member of the National Association of Bodyworkers in Religious Service, massages Michelle Ackerman, a dentist who herself is a student of massage.

paths intersecting. Some have expanded into holistic health by offering stress-management sessions, hatha yoga or Oriental massage, for example.

In September, Sister Lawson and Judith Murphy, R.N., who runs the Helping Hands Center in Fairport, will begin to offer their services at Rochester's Mercy Prayer Center, which works to develop spiritual leadership among lay people. The two ther-

apists will provide massage in conjunction with the center's spiritual-development programs.

Almost anyone of any age can benefit from massage, Sister Lawson said. "With the pressures of technology and the way the job market is, and people giving their all to their work because a job position was cut back, I think stress on people is greater and greater.

"They need to take time for themselves, to step away from themselves, to learn to take care of themselves," she said, adding that massage is one way of doing that.

Massage also is popular among people with such medical problems as multiple sclerosis, chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia, as well as those anticipating or recovering from surgery.

Murphy, a Corpus Christi parishioner who also performs massage therapy for homebound people, noted that hospitals use massage therapy to help premature babies grow.

Massage therapists today generally use a method developed by the Esalen Institute in California. This method is considered more relaxing than the "pounding" technique popularized by Swedish practitioners.

Murphy and Sister Lawson both consider massage a com-

plementary treatment, rather than an alternative, to standard medical care.

For some people, massage can even become a birthday gift to themselves, noted massage therapist Margaret Hammele Ruehle, also a parishioner at Corpus Christi Church.

"Now that I'm in it, I don't see it as a special treat but more a necessity," Ruehle said, explaining that she finds massage helps integrate her physical and spiritual self through an enhanced appreciation of the body, the "earthen vessel."

Besides offering massage through Personal Energy in Rochester, she also works out of Highland Hospital's Center for Women. In February the hospital began offering massage one day a week, Ruehle said.

"Already they have a massage therapist five days a week and two evenings, and they're just filling up the time slots," she noted.

Ruehle speculated that such growth has a lot to do with the trust people place in a hospital environment.

For most prospective clients, she said, "The big question people have is, 'What do I wear,' though I think they're thinking more, 'What do I not wear?'"

A client may wear a few items of clothing during the massage, depending on his or her comfort level, covers up with a towel or blanket and lies on a table. Ruehle noted that the therapy is performed in privacy and that the therapist undrapes one area of the client's body at a time to perform the massage.

Sister Lawson said people can find massage therapists through word-of-mouth referrals or the telephone directory. In general, massage therapy costs \$20-30 for a half hour and \$40-50 for an hour. It usually is not covered by insurance.

When they call to inquire, she said, prospective clients should ask if the therapist deals with any particular medical concerns or conditions, if he or she specializes in certain types of massage, uses music or conversation as part of the therapy, or prays with clients or offers any other spiritual dimension.

Some days, Ruehle said, a massage feels like a "noncaloric hot-fudge-sundae kind of thing, a ton of enjoyment." Yet it is also an ancient procedure, a form of healing that has endured the ages.

"It is a quiet way to help people feel better," she said.

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