

Doreen Kahale, who suffers from chronic pain, gets a feel for Ian Hepburn's harp. Lying on a mattress fitted with speakers that transmit vibration instead of sound, she says the therapy relaxes her and eases her pain.



ASHLEY FRASER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

With a pluck of his harp, Ian Hepburn sends healing vibrations to soothe pain, stress and other problems. Now, a Hawkesbury hospital will start a harp therapy program – a first for a North American hospital

BY BECKY RYNOR

Ian Hepburn is equal parts musician, teacher, stand-up comic and healer.

"You will notice we never use the fifth finger in harp playing," he says to the small, attentive group sitting around him in a semi-circle. Each is hugging a small, 29-string harp into the hollow of their right shoulder.

"So if you're wondering when are we going to get to the fifth finger, it's never, so we'll just lop it off now and forget about it."

The 17 people laughing along — although none as enthusiastically as Mr. Hepburn himself — are attending a Saturday workshop at the Woodroffe Campus of Algonquin College.

They're a mixed group. Some are strictly interested in learning to play the harp, so they get an introduction to the basics as Hepburn demonstrates how to hold the instrument, proper fingering and some scales. Others are here because they are intrigued by the title of the workshop: "The Healing Harp." Still others are looking for relief.

Doreen Kahale loves listening to harp music while relaxing at home, but she also suffers from chronic neck and sciatic pain. When Mr. Hepburn asks for volunteers who are in pain, hers is one of the first hands in the air.

"I'm currently on medical leave," says the 54-year-old public servant. "I had back surgery in my early 20s, but I still experience chronic pain."

She lies down on a massage table. Its mattress has been fitted with two transducer speakers, which are used to transmit vibration instead of sound. Mr. Hepburn is already seated at his 38-string harp, which is connected to an amplifier plugged into the

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mattress. He begins to play, plucking up and down the musical range of the harp until Ms. Kahale says she can feel vibrations in those muscles that cause her pain. He starts to improvise music around that frequency on the harp, creating what he describes as "an internal massage."

"From the very beginning, certain areas of my body immediately responded," Ms. Kahale says after the therapy session. "Like this," as she reaches over and gently, but rapidly shakes another person's knee.

"There were significant vibrations, mostly in the lower back, then the upper back (of the) neck. Then the two at the same time. Then a rolling sensation."

Twenty minutes after Mr. Hepburn stopped playing, she could still feel vibrations in her entire upper body, as well in as her right leg where she experiences sciatic pain.

"I feel unsettled, but not in a negative sense. And I have no pain in my shoulders."

A day later, the chronic pain in her neck is still about 99-per-cent gone.

"Oh my god, it was wonderful," she says. "I had better extension, more mobility to turn my head right or left. It was relaxing, it's non-intrusive and to know something like that is being developed for the average person ... I'm just so excited by it, to have experienced it and to have felt a difference."

Mr. Hepburn hopes to help many more people like Ms. Kahale. Last week, the Hawkesbury and District General Hospital gave him the final go-ahead to start a vibroacoustic harp therapy program. He plans to

have the program in place by the end of this month, making Hawkesbury the first hospital in North America to offer harp therapy.

"It's pleasant, easy, comfortable and there are no side-effects," says Mr. Hepburn. "And there are no conditions where it can't be used, except for heart conditions and for people who are using blood thinners because you could shake a blood clot loose. I don't say this is a cure. I would never say that. Is it going to cure cancer? Is that possible? I think it's possible."

Mr. Hepburn, already an accomplished professional pianist, taught himself to play the harp about 13 years ago. After reading an article in a harp magazine about Vibro-Acoustic Harp Therapy, he was intrigued, and began to volunteer at the Hawkesbury hospital in 2003 with his harp in tow.

"I built a little dolly, and I would go along the corridors, stop and play. Then move and stop and play. Especially if the nurses said, 'Oh, so-and-so could use a pick-up.' Or if there was a palliative situation. I was sort of like a harp troubadour," he laughs. "But I could see the effects it had on patients and their families."

"One day there was a woman in distress. She was agitated and yelling. She had just come in and the nurses hadn't got her meds balanced. I started playing in the lower frequencies and she calmed right down. Then I moved to the upper frequencies, the higher notes, and she became more agitated. The pitch of her noise was raised also and she began to rock more vigorously."

"So I began to wonder, is this a coincidence? So I moved back down to the lower notes, she calmed down, then up to the higher notes and again she became agitated."

"Did I cause this? Was the frequency range I was playing in, the cause of the calmness and agitation? I did this three times and I thought, well I can't tease this woman any more. But I thought 'I'm witnessing this. I made this happen. ... This is not New Age voodoo. I saw it happening right in front of me.'"

Last year, Mr. Hepburn attended a conference on VAHT with harp therapy pioneer Sarajane Williams. He came back convinced of its merits and then approached the Hawkesbury hospital with a proposal to start a program there. The Ontario Trillium Foundation offered \$10,000 to buy a harp and amplifier, while the hospital has given him a grant of \$5,000 to buy a sound table, retrofit a hospital bed and get other equipment.

"I'm a curious person," says Dr. Jean Fairfield, the chief of staff at the hospital.

"So we have to be curious about this. It's a safe thing to listen to music," he says. "Maybe we can treat pain with this. Pain can be treated with laughter. If you laugh till your belly hurts, it triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain killers, and produces a general sense of well-being."

"With VAHT, could there be similar substance released? We are not equipped to study that. We are not a research centre. But if we go ahead with this, in the future we could possibly seek out further research funding. First, we'll have to experiment with it."

Dr. Fairfield says he even took a turn on the vibroacoustic mat during Mr. Hepburn's VAHT presentation to hospital staff, visitors and volunteer patients.

"It was soothing. It was calming. I must say I have absolutely no ailments, so I have nothing to fix. But I've stopped in the hallways of the hospital when Ian is playing his harp. I've seen how the family members react."

"One person said, 'My dad was grimacing. He was in pain. But when he heard Ian, he was a different person.' To be on the mat went beyond that. It added the sense of touch. All of a sudden you felt embraced by the music. It was better than a hot bath."

# GOOD VIBRATIONS

## TIMELINE: How soundwaves were tuned to healing

### 18TH CENTURY: Cymatics is born

■ The study of cymatics, or the physical patterns produced by sound, began with German physicist **Ernst Chladni**, known as "the father of acoustics." In the early 18th century, he discovered that geometric patterns would form when he covered a plate with a thin layer of sand and vibrated the plate with a specific tone, such as a violin bow drawn along the edge of the plate.

### 20TH CENTURY: Connection to health

■ Swiss physician **Hans Jenny** used Chladni's findings to further research the visual display of sound. His studies were based on the belief that vibration determines the structure and growth of all biological systems, with each cell generating its own frequency. Jenny also thought that the key to understanding healing lay in how different frequencies or tones affect genes, cells and organs.

■ British doctor **Sir Peter Guy Manners** collated these earlier findings, then pioneered and developed the use of vibration as therapy. But it was Norwegian educator and therapist **Olav Skille** who first used the vibrations from music to treat severely mentally and physically disabled children. He developed what he called a "music bath" in which he played synthesized music half a meter under a bed.

### 1990s: Harp therapy begins

■ The first person widely credited with first applying a harp to this therapy is **Sarajane Williams** of Pennsylvania. In 1990, unaware of the scientific history, she was working as a nurse, counsellor and biofeedback therapist in a chronic pain centre in Bethlehem, using a Genesis Unit, which is similar to a massage table, but the patient is surrounded by speakers to produce a "musical massage." She says she "got bored with playing CDs" in her work.

"I'm a harpist. So one day I took my harp in, and I found a microphone jack on the Genesis Unit, and plugged it in."

"I found that each note resonated in a different part of the body. If a person had pain in their shoulders, if I could find the right note that would resonate in that part of the body, then I would improvise music around that note," she says.

Ms. Williams went on to research the effects of VibroAcoustic Harp Therapy and published two books on her findings.

"The potential therapeutic applications include treatment of fibromyalgia, arthritis, muscular tension, stress, anxiety, depression, headaches, insomnia, respiratory problems, chronic pain, tinnitus, emotional issues and lymphedema," she says.

"I've just always known vibrations heal," says Ruth Richardson, the co-ordinator of the Palliative Care program at Algonquin College. She arranged for the VAHT workshop to be brought to the college.

"People are at least 90-per-cent fluids. And fluids are very affected by vibrations. We're using sound waves already. Ultrasound is an excellent example," she says.

"Palliative care is an area of care that allows us the opportunity to look at alternatives. When traditional medicine says there's nothing more we can do for you, I say 'Yes, there is. There's palliative care.' I've seen enough anecdotal evidence to know this (VAHT) works. It especially works with palliative patients."

"There isn't anyone who's gotten off this bed that doesn't say, 'I feel better,'" Mr. Hepburn says. "We are vibrations. It isn't a mind game you're playing with yourself. You can believe in it or not. It doesn't matter. You will be affected by it."