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## North Idaho gets physical

*More residents bypass doctors, pills in favor of physical therapists*

Jami Todd squatted beside a client like a coach with a prize fighter and surveyed the situation. As if by instinct, she pressed the woman's stomach, pulled her into a deeper lean and asked, knowingly, "you're not even feeling that stretch anymore, are you? Let's scrap it."

The physical therapist readjusted the patient and pivoted to inspect another woman propped on a cervical pillow, one leg buttressing the wall. Todd made a few adjustments and moved on. "To explain what I'm doing, you'd need a medical science degree," said the slim professional at Pinnacle Physical Therapy and Sports Medicine in Coeur d'Alene.



*Physical Therapist Virginia Taft works with Brendan Carpenter on rehabilitating a wrist tendon injury Monday during a therapy session at Coeur d'Alene Hand Therapy and Healing Center.*

Mending an achy limb often ties to tweaking posture or other joints, as well, she said, to prevent more bodily dysfunctions from budding. "When we're treating someone with an injured foot and a faulty hip, we need to treat the hip before we focus on the foot,"

Todd said. "Basically, we have to look at the body as a whole."

Comprehensive analysis comes with the territory at movement therapy clinics. Sidling out of the shadow of physicians' referrals, physical therapists are no longer third-party tune-up providers, but sought out as separate entities on the health care market.

Signs of the trend are prevalent across Kootenai County. Inveterate physical therapists recall there were a handful of them at best in the area 20 years ago, whereas now more than 70 of their kind cover the pages of the local phone book.

With Idaho a direct-access state, patients can walk through a physical therapist's door without a physician's referral, and providers say locals are taking advantage more and more in recent years.

The movement professionals currently need a bachelor's or master's degree. The American Physical Therapy Association anticipates that by 2020, all physical therapists will be graduating with doctorate degrees, and people will sidestep physicians entirely to seek their help.

"We're not doing anything more than we've ever done," Todd said. "It just looks that way because of the advancement in degrees -- first it was just a certification, then bachelor's degree, then master's, now doctorate. It looks like we're suddenly taking on the body as a whole, but we've always done that."

*Therapy 1*

In fact what's changed is the minds of potential patients. Physical therapists in the area say their field has become all the rage due to hordes of health-savvy baby boomers settling in.

A rising number of patients are opting for movement therapy treatment that lets them take health care into their own hands -- and their own homes.

"What I see with a lot of patients anymore is they're coming in disenchanted with constantly throwing medications at problems, and the side affects of those medications," said Kevin Sgroi of Joshua Tree Physical Therapy in Hayden. "They don't want that, they want to be active. I have some patients in their 70s who are still skiing in the wintertime, and they want to maintain that lifestyle. The way to do that is physical therapy."

Charging between \$50 to \$100 per visit, physical therapists administer stretching, massage and ultrasound in the office, and assign homework routines clients take on by themselves.

Physical therapists aim for patients to gradually move on from the clinic and fix themselves. Nanette Haskett, 56, could always coast through 10-hour shifts of standing and running around at her deli job, at least before her joint pain made wielding the pricing gun a teary endeavor.

Leery of the surgery doctors suggested, she turned to occupational therapist Ginny Taft at Coeur d'Alene Hand Therapy and Healing. Haskett runs through a list of stretches and exercises at home, she said, and Taft is grooming her to manage the pain independently by listening to her body and making necessary adjustments to relieve her digits.

After only about six visits with Taft, the pain has subsided enough to soldier through a day of punching buttons on the cash register. "I had to cowgirl it up the other day -- grit in my teeth and suck in my stomach to get through the pain," she admitted. "But it's better."

Taft said more and more, people are calling her without seeking doctor's recommendations first. "I think people have become more aware of their health care alternatives, and are much more active in their own health care than they used to be," she said.

John F. Long, a doctor of osteopathic medicine at Spokane Sports and Spine, said he is seeing the same trend of people bypassing physicians to go straight to physical therapists.

He understands why. Physical therapists get more time with patients to thoroughly diagnose them, and can provide a comprehensive analysis, whether muscular-skeletal or neurological.

"Patients may feel they get more information from physical therapists regarding their situation than from their primary care providers," he said.

But he doesn't like it. If Long had his way, neither Idaho, Washington nor any other state would allow people to see physical therapists without a doctor's referral.

"They're not trained the same way physicians are trained -- they've not gone to medical school, they have not had residency training," he said. "I know a specific case where a woman had back pain and was treated for a number of months by a physical therapist, but what she had was a cancer that had metastasized to her spine," he said. "By the time she was diagnosed properly, it was too late, and she passed away. One case like that is enough for me to say it's not OK." But Sgroi said an experienced physical therapist will know when to recognize that treatment isn't working and a doctor is needed, especially since Idaho passed legislation in January requiring physical therapists to stack up 16 hours of continuing education per year.

"If anybody should know anything about pathologies for muscular-skeletal therapies, it should be a physical therapist," he said.

Physicians had told Dean Children repeatedly that the remedy for her spasming leg was yet another back surgery, though it was scar tissue from two previous surgeries that was aggravating the random shudders.

"I had been suffering for 14 years, and the doctors couldn't heal me," the Coeur d'Alene resident said. When a friend suggested Sgroi, she acquiesced.

After two years of stretches and medication delivered through electrical currents, the physical therapist quelled nearly all the tremors, she said. Children can now stand while she fits curlers into her hair, while she had to sit before. "There's a difference in my quality of life," she announced.

But her real satisfaction derives elsewhere -- from placing her body in the hands of someone she trusts. "Here, they listen," she said. "And I can repeat that. They listen."