



Came out of 'yoga closet'

10 years of alternative medicine for Hill M.D.



Dr. Michael Cheikin, former Medical Director of Chestnut Hill Rehabilitation Hospital, has been teaching yoga for 10 years at the Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church. (Photo by Erin Vertreace)

by MICHAEL CHEIKIN, M.D.

This month begins the 11th year I will be teaching yoga in Chestnut Hill. If someone had predicted the changes in yoga and holistic medicine, and the effect on my professional and personal life, that would occur over these 10 years, they would have seemed a fantasy, or more likely a joke.

When I began teaching yoga in March, 1998, it was nothing short of insane. First of all, yoga was the remnant of the '60s, with rare classes taught in church basements. Also, teaching yoga was not con-

sidered appropriate for a physician. Some warned that I might lose my medical license. At the time, I was the Medical Director of Chestnut Hill Rehabilitation Hospital.

Chestnut Hill was considered a conservative community; how would it look? A spokesperson for Chestnut Hill Health Care sent me angry memos (this was the pre-email era) about how the classes would reflect on the institution. After all, everyone knows that people who do yoga are hippies who have holes in their pants.

However, despite the above

obstacles and my own fears, teaching yoga was the right thing to do. I had been practicing yoga myself for over 15 years, and it helped me heal many of my aches and pains, including carpal tunnel syndrome, which, at the time, could only be helped by surgery. I had offered yoga in my practice to selected pain patients who had not succeeded with the usual fare of medications, physical therapy and surgery.

Even then, I didn't call it yoga; I called it "a special type of physical therapy where you add breath and awareness to the exercises." The amazing thing for my patients, and

even my skeptical self, was that it worked!

As the number of patients with chronic pain increased, I didn't have enough time to do "private lessons" with each patient. Therefore, I began to think about teaching a class. I wasn't ready to call it yoga, so I called it "Healing Mind, Healthy Body." With the help of Joanne Rosenbaum at the Chestnut Hill Women's Center, I offered this class. A few people showed up. However, I couldn't really explain what it was without calling it yoga, so it failed.

Then, two events occurred with-

in a one-week period that clinched my decision to come out of the "yoga closet." First, one of my private patients, who had done well with the yoga, said to me, "Just get over it; teach a yoga class." A day later, I got a call from a yoga class that needed a teacher; their teacher of several years had moved to California. There is a saying in yoga that "when the student is ready, the teacher (guru) will appear." In this case, the opposite occurred. I was ready, and the class appeared. I immediately went from having no yoga class or students to 18 students. This was just the beginning of one of the most important lessons of my career as a physician.

At the Rehab Hospital, there was a big, beautiful chapel that virtually sat empty. Despite the lack of adequate heat or air conditioning, the 100-year-old chapel with its wooden vaulted ceilings was a perfect place to teach yoga.

Within a few weeks, with the administrative support of Joanne Rosenbaum of the Chestnut Hill Women's Center, class began with 18 experienced yoga students. The communities of Chestnut Hill, Mt. Airy and Germantown enthusiastically supported the class, essentially through word of mouth. Within a year, I had two more classes and had an average census of 25 in the evening classes. People were choosing to come to Chestnut Hill Rehab Hospital for routine services because yoga class, even if they didn't attend, represented a philosophy that they embraced.

Yoga practice (sadhana) is, by its very nature, a microcosm of the macrocosm of a person's mind,

(Continued on page 33)

Leaves 'yoga closet'

(Continued from page 21)

body and spirit. Just like watching a person doing sport, watching how people do yoga provides more information about their functioning and health than an MRI or many of the other diagnostic tests that conventional medicine utilizes.

You can even see where their minds go. That was not my only lesson. My average student was in his/her 40s or 50s. So we had to deal with lots of stiffness, pain, old injuries and even prior surgeries. Many would try to do the poses, but would strain, fall and hurt themselves. This was clearly not the desired goal of a yoga class — especially one taught by a medical doctor! I had previously learned about the work of a modern yoga guru named BKS Iyengar. His major contribution to yoga has been the precise alignment of yoga poses and the use of props (blocks, belts, blankets and chairs) to enable people to enter yoga poses in conformation with their body's limitations.

I immediately began reviewing Iyengar's voluminous work and began studying with numerous Iyengar teachers, including two gems here in Philadelphia, senior instructors Joan White and Marion Garfinkel. I bought a few thousand dollars worth of props for my class. The rate of frustration, over-doing and injury decreased. The precision of the poses appealed to my scientific mind. I began to think of each pose like a drug. Each pose could be "dosed" by how far one went into the pose, and how much time one held a pose. (In my own practice, I learned that even a few sec-

onds of certain poses had important effects.)

At the same time I was studying Iyengar, I was also studying another style of yoga from the opposite side of the tracks, called Ashtanga Yoga. Ashtanga Yoga, sometimes called "power yoga" was the beginning of many of the current spin-offs that are now taught in gyms.

I began to apply this curriculum to many conditions that conventional medicine could at best palliate but not cure. These included carpal tunnel syndrome, low back pain, neck and shoulder pain, and even non-physical problems such as fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, headache, gastrointestinal disorders, chest pain, anxiety and depression, to name a few.

This success forced me to begin to think about other "alternative" methods, such as acupuncture and nutrition. Could they also be effective? I began thinking more and more about acupuncture, since it is as ancient as yoga and utilizes an "energy" system similar to that proposed by yoga.

Michael Cheikin, M.D., is a holistic physician and published playwright. He is board-certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Pain Management, Spinal Cord Medicine and Electrodiagnostic Medicine. He has studied alternative modalities for 30 years. He runs a medical center in Plymouth Meeting, teaches yoga classes at Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church and is associate medical director at the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential in Wyndmoor.

To be continued.

Director resigned from Hill Rehab with 'mixed emotions'

by MICHAEL CHEIKIN, M.D.

Part Two

When I began to add acupuncture to my patients' treatment plan, I saw results that, to this day, defy my scientific mind. I low could a knee that had "bone on bone" and multiple arthroscopies become pain free, not just for a few hours (as would happen with opiates) but weeks to months? It was somehow facilitating a healing process that could not yet be explained by western medicine. Putting the acupuncture together with yoga was even more effective. As I explain to my patients, yoga is like brushing your teeth, and acupuncture is like getting your teeth cleaned by a professional. Optimal care requires both; and they work synergistically.

Adding national/metabolic and digestive system principles was the next big nut. A review of the most basic information by respected authors quickly revealed that today's conventional foods are not what they were 100 years ago, or even 10 years ago — they are deficient in many essential nutrients; and most of the food processing technologies damage nutrients and introduce chemicals (such as pesticides, hydrogenated oils and acryl amides) that accumulate in our fat, muscles and brains and essentially poison us from within.

Changing people's diets, analyzing their absorption and malabsorption of critical nutrients, and providing supplements to 1)



Dr. Michael Cheikin, former Medical Director of Chestnut Hill Rehabilitation Hospital, has been teaching yoga for 10 years at the Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church. (Photo by Erin Vertrace)

replace what was missing; 2) protect against toxins; 3) improve absorption and 4) regularize elimination proved to be an important additional tool.

Another important part of my growth was learning, actually unlearning, how to relate to my patients. From the first day in medical school, working with cadavers, doctors are taught to distance themselves from their patients under the guise of "objectivity."

These growing relationships reminded me of images of old country doctors, who lived in the same communities they served. This interest in my patients as people made me a better listener — a quality that is not encouraged in medical training. Not only was this yoga class changing my patients'/students, it was changing me.

It was now 2004-05 and this process, now over five years in the making, began to ruin me as a conventional physician. I no longer believed in many of the models of "dis-ease" that I had been taught. I saw patients truly heal with yoga, acupuncture and nutrition, rather than simply suppress or mask symptoms with drugs. I found it harder and harder to work with patients who only wanted a pill and truly weren't committed to taking charge of their own life.

By this time, the wonderful Chestnut Hill Hospital as I first knew it from 1989 was slowly

dying from the economics of corporate America. I was hearing more and more about money and less and less about mission. In survival mode, the administration still did not understand the importance of "alternative" medicine to the community and to the future of medicine. With a partner, we began looking for a space where we could expand this new model of medicine. I chose Plymouth Meeting as it was at the crossroads of North-South and East-West venues. We found a beautiful, quiet location in Plymouth Meeting that had adequate parking and a basement that could be converted into my dream of a yoga/conference studio.

Chestnut Hill HealthCare was sold in March, 2005. In April, 2005, with very mixed emotions, after over 10 years of attempted creativity, I resigned as Medical Director

of Chestnut Hill Rehabilitation Hospital and closed my group practice. However, the Chestnut Hill community did not want me to move my classes to Plymouth Meeting. My students helped me find our current space, at Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church ("CHUMC"), right across from Chestnut Hill Hospital!

I received a second message that I should stay in Chestnut Hill. Out of the blue, I was contacted by the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential, just two doors down from Chestnut Hill Rehab Hospital. I had strolled in there several years before (after driving past it for over 10 years) looking for a space to teach yoga. There I found a dedicated group of people, who for the past 50 years have been providing rehabilitation and integrated medicine to help blind, deaf and neurologically injured

children from all over the world.

They asked me to be on their medical staff and serve as their Associate Medical Director. Now for the past two years, I have had the privilege and opportunity to work with and help children as young as six months old, by teaching their parents about nutrition, yoga and breath.

At CHUMC, with Michelle Carlino, we now teach four classes per week at the gentle and beginner level (as well as other classes at our Center for Optimal Health in Plymouth Meeting). We don't envision our classes as competing with "gym yoga" or "fitness," as they are geared more toward education, health and stress reduction.

Excessive exercise, including yoga, is actually stress producing, and feeds into the American drive for speed and strength. Our philosophy is that of "less is more," where we begin to notice the subtlety of our bodies and minds. We refer to the Sanskrit word "ahimsa," also used by Gandhi, which means "non-violence."

The violence that we refer to is the violence that we often inflict on ourselves — our minds, bodies and spirits. We remind our patients that consumerism and materialism are geared to feeding fear and dissatisfaction with our current self and state of being.

Michael Cheikin, M.D., is a holistic physician and published playwright. He is board-certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Pain Management, Spinal Cord Medicine and Electrodiagnostic Medicine. He has studied alternative modalities for 30 years. You can contact Dr. Cheikin at 610-239-8626 or cheikinm@msn.com

To be continued

Doctor 'un-invited' because of misconception about yoga

by MICHAEL CHEIKIN, M.D.

Part Three

The spirituality that yoga engenders is implicit in the process. It is a paradox that by doing a physical thing, so much can change. It is quite different from exercise. What makes it different is what we are doing with our minds and breath. You cannot do yoga with the TV on or the children/pets jumping in the room. It's a time to focus on the self. Yoga is about inner space — space in the joints, in the muscles, in the mind, and in the spirit.

Religious leaders of most denominations have embraced yoga as a means of spirituality. However, some have rejected it. For example, I have been un-invited to some health fairs located at local churches because the church leaders misinterpret yoga as a practice based in Hinduism. This is equivalent to believing that one must be a Chinese Buddhist to practice acupuncture. Yoga is not a religion, but the ultimate training method. It is a form of "detoxification," a process which enables us to clean out the junk and get closer to who we were meant to be.

The real-time experience (not the thinking about) of parts of our bodies and minds that have been idle for decades stimulates vital



Dr. Cheikin adjusts the position of a yoga student at the Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church. (Photo by Erin Vertreace)

areas of our brains and physiology and jump-starts a growth process. I have seen this process work for patients from age 6 months to 84 years old.

Based on this experience, in my office practice, I have begun to routinely measure stress hormones and other measures of biochemical imbalance, including toxins such as heavy metals. It continues to astound me how many of my patients (including myself), who seem to be healthy on the outside, have objective evidence of "burning out" metabolically. We were not designed to be in light 16 hours per day, 12 months of the year. We go from one stressor, such as a job, to another stressor, such as a gym, and then to another, an action drama on TV.

Most animals, including our dogs and cats, have periods of intense activity followed by even longer periods of rest. When we run on a treadmill 40 - 60 minutes every day, or train for a marathon,

the body cannot distinguish this from running from lions or being in battle for our life. This is the core reason why many athletes burn out their joints and become fatigued after a decade or so. Yoga, when done properly, rebalances our hormones and can reverse this premature aging process.

The last lesson that I have learned is that of patience. While society's definition of a physician is paternal and authoritarian, I have learned that I cannot change anyone. And to use typical physician lines like, "If you don't do this, you will die" also doesn't work. Rather than fear, I'd rather instill inspiration and education. I have to accept the fact that as with children, the best we can do is serve as a model, plant a seed, be supportive rather than judgmental, and keep the door open. Each of us must make our journeys at our own pace.

However, the themes remain the same — balance, education, lifestyle, good nutrition, good sleep, the right yoga and exercise, and finding value in every day. We are getting better at how to do this. This practice of holistic medicine is the way medicine used to be practiced, and hopefully will be practiced in the not-too-distant future.

So in conclusion, I want to thank the Chestnut Hill and Mt. Airy communities for their support and enthusiasm, and for providing me the opportunity to grow my practice and my self in a direction that I could have never imagined just 10 years ago.

Michael Cheikin, M.D. is a holistic physician (and a published playwright), Board Certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation ("Physiatry"), Pain Management, Spinal Cord Medicine and Electrodiagnostic Medicine and licensed in Medical Acupuncture. He provides leadership to several medical institutions. Dr. Cheikin has extensively studied yoga, diet and metabolism, Ayurvedic, Chinese and energy medicine and other alternative modalities for 30 years. He can be reached at 610-239-8626, drc@c4oh.org or www.cheikin.com.