

HEALTH

Slow moves to battle body pain

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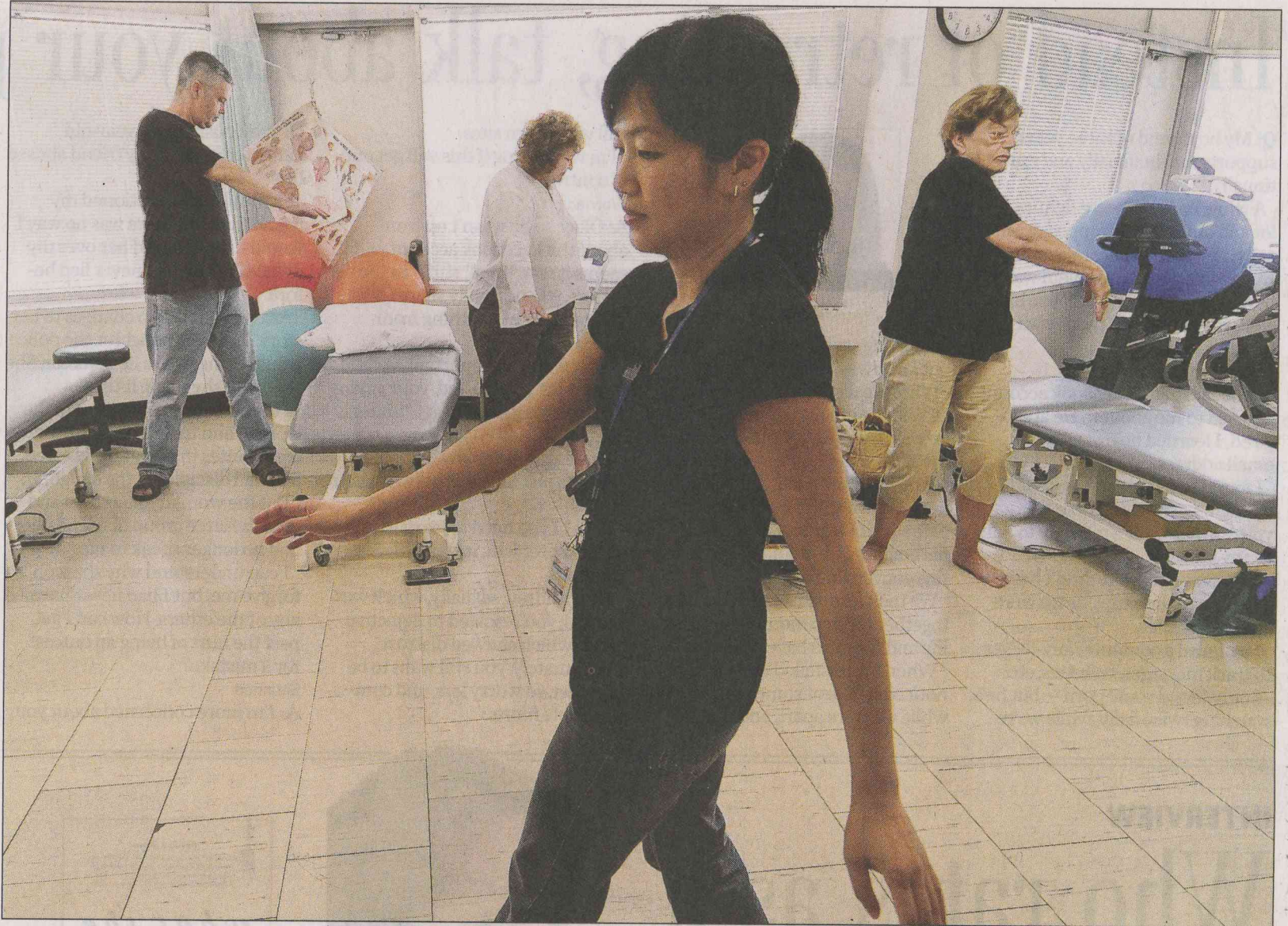
Five patients whose lives have been trimmed or gutted by pain stand before their petite class leader at Bridgepoint Health, eyes closed, minds focused on the soft music and instructions to breathe deeply and move slowly.

QIGONG continued on E6



TANNIS TOOHEY/TORONTO STAR

Andree Therese Stock, 67, takes qigong at Bridgepoint hospital to help with her chronic pain.



TANNIS TOOHEY PHOTOS /TORONTO STAR

Louisa Leong, physiotherapist leads the qigong class at Bridgepoint. She has about 20 moves that she adapts to the needs of each class.

Modern medicine, meet qigong

QIGONG from E1

Mary Laposta sets aside her crutches to participate. A former personal support worker, she has been disabled since a back injury in November 2008, left her in constant pain.

"It's a relief. When you don't move because of the pain, it gets worse, so you need to keep moving," says Laposta, 48, a patient in the pain management program at the hospital, near Gerrard St. E. and the Don Valley Parkway.

That is where qigong comes in. The ancient Chinese martial art is being enlisted by modern medicine to battle the effects of chronic pain, cancer and cancer treatments, multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, arthritis and other conditions that can severely limit mobility.

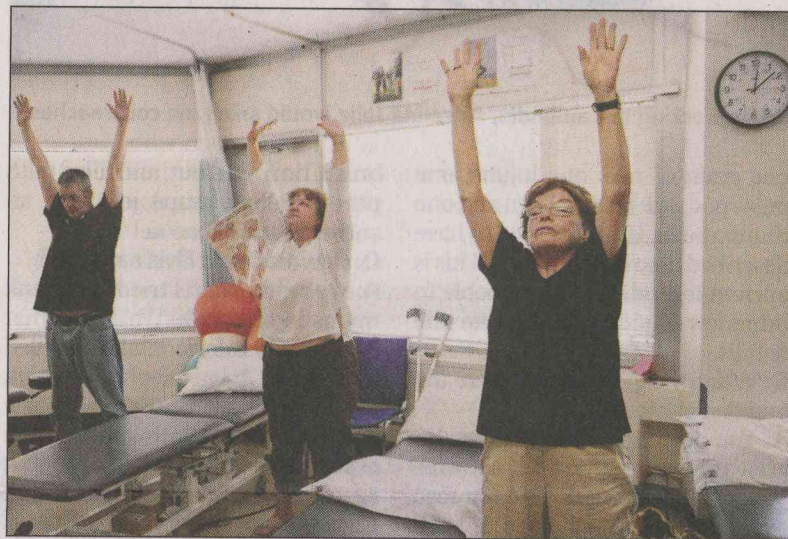
Qigong is not a cure, but it can enhance flexibility and strength among people who are too ill to exercise vigorously, or even at all.

"It's deceptive. It seems so simple but it's quite a powerful tool," says Andrée Thérèse Stock, 67, who has suffered migraine headaches daily since she was a teenager and is also enrolled in the Bridgepoint program.

Qigong combines light, dancelike body movements with breathing and meditation techniques, set to soothing music.

Weekly classes have been held for patients in the pain management program since 2003, says program founder Dr. Edward Robinson.

The program accepts patients suffering from chronic pain as a result of any illness or condition, including severe arthritis and neurological disorders. The groups are some-



Andrew Morrison, Mary Laposta, and Andrée Thérèse Stock engage in the slow, steady movements of qigong.

times so diverse that the only thing they have in common is pain.

Qigong can be adapted to any level of activity. One group had four or five members who were all in wheelchairs.

"They couldn't walk or stand, but they could do qigong," says Robinson.

Louisa Leong, a physiotherapist and a qigong instructor at Bridgepoint, learned tai chi and qigong from her father, who is still healthy in his 80s and practicing both each day.

There is no single qigong authority. The art is passed down from teacher to pupil. Leong has 20 different qigong movements, such as gentle pushing or reaching, that she adapts to the needs of each group.

Patients at Bridgepoint receive a CD that leads them through a 20-minute set of qigong moves they can do at home.

Wellspring cancer support centres in the GTA offer eight-week qigong courses, says Ayala Beck, a manager there.

"It helps patients release tension, focus, feel grounded and improve overall physical condition while dealing with cancer," says Beck.

One patient with breast cancer who could not lift her arms over her head when she began the course regained a full range of movement after the course, says Beck. "It's very popular."

Qigong movements are similar to the movements used in tai chi and incorporate some simplified tai chi moves, at a slower, gentler pace. The emphasis in qigong is on releasing tension and preserving mobility.

Fervent disciples of the art claim qigong can result in miraculous cures. Modern science has more temperate views.

A 2007 Swedish study of the effects of qigong on 57 women with fibromyalgia found that regular practice over seven weeks had a positive and reliable effect. The researchers concluded that qigong could be a useful compliment to medical treatment for people with fibromyalgia, a condition characterized by widespread body pain and stiffness.

Lyn McMahon leads qigong groups at Wellspring for people recovering from surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. She also helps lead public qigong classes at St. Andrew's Church on Wednesdays at 5:30 p.m., where the fee is \$7 for a class. The class is on summer break and resumes Sept. 8.

McMahon believes in the elusive concept of qi, which in Chinese philosophy is a life force that flows through the human body. Qigong promotes the proper flow of this energy and builds internal energy, strengthening the immune system, she says.

"You have to be patient and you have to do the breathing and postures and you have to challenge yourself," says McMahon. "Making small changes will make a big difference eventually. That's the theory we use."

Richmond Hill physiotherapist Elliot Tse, says he uses tai chi and qigong for personal relaxation and exercise.

He often recommends them to patients who want to improve balance and cardiovascular function. He thinks they offer a good alternative to more traditional exercises, which can be dull and repetitive.

"It has momentum. It makes people more willing to do it at home."