

Health Notes

DAY OFF FROM CAREGIVING

... Spouses and family members who are **caregivers of stroke patients** will get a day off compliments of the Peninsula Stroke Association. **"A Day Off from Caregiving" Retreat** includes breakfast, lunch, snacks, massages, speakers and quiet personal time for reading, walking and knitting. The retreat will be held at the **Jesuit Center** in Los Altos on Aug. 17 from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The day off is free of charge. To qualify, a minimum one year in the role of a primary caregiver is required. Past participants who attended the event for free may re-enroll for \$50. Call 650-565-8485 or e-mail support@psastroke.org.

TEN-HUT! ... Increase agility, balance, flexibility, aerobic capacity and muscle strength, while making new friends at **Lifelong Fitness Challenge Camps**, taking place Aug. 18-Sept. 27 and Sept. 29-Nov. 8. The six-week sessions are for participants 50 and older. Fees range from \$70 to \$150, depending on the number of sessions and if the participant is a member or nonmember. Camps take place at 8:30 a.m. at Cobb Field on the Stanford Campus, rain or shine. For more information call 650-361-8282 or e-mail info@50plus.org.

OR THERE'S CAMP AVENIDAS

... Hands-on fitness, health, nutrition and health seminars for people 50 and older and exercise classes exploring a variety of fitness approaches from country line dancing to qigong will take place Aug. 20-24 at **Camp Avenidas**, which takes place at **Peninsula Volunteers Little House**, 800 Middle Ave., Menlo Park. A celebration picnic takes place at Foothills Park in Palo Alto on Aug. 24. Fee is \$85 for Avenidas and Little House members and \$105 for nonmembers. To register or for information, call Judith Webb 650-289-5436 or visit www.avenidas.org.

PAIN AFTER STROKE ... is the topic of a discussion to be led by Raymond Gaeta, MD, at the Aug. 23 **Stanford Stroke Group** meeting. The talk takes place from 5:30 to 7 p.m. at Stanford Hospital, north cafeteria room on the first floor, 300 Pasteur Drive, Palo Alto. The meeting and lecture are open to the public. For information, call the Peninsula Stroke Association 650-565-8485 or visit www.psastroke.org.

DEAR ABBY ... Speaking from the heart, **"Dear Abby"** columnist **Jeanne Phillips** will be the guest speaker at the 17th Annual **One from the Heart Awards Breakfast**, a fundraiser for the **Pathways Hospice Foundation**. Pathways offers compassionate in-home health care for the dying and grief-support services. The event takes place Oct. 11. For more information, call 800-753-3071.

Health Notes is a monthly feature announcing health and fitness events and news. Send news to Health & Fitness Editor Sue Dremann at sdremann@paweekly.com.

Health&Fitness

A monthly section on recreation and health, edited by Sue Dremann



Esther Gokhale helps Prudence Breitrose improve her posture during a private session.

Oh, my aching back!

Anthropological approach focuses on eliminating pain through posture, roots

by Rotem Ben-Shachar

Ben Davidson, assistant dean of students at Stanford University, has always led an active lifestyle: dancing, running, swimming or hiking on a daily basis. But after straining his lower back in 1989, he began to gradually experience a decrease in mobility due to chronic back pain.

Davidson had tried more than 15 different types of treatment, both alternative and traditional, including physical therapy, sports medicine, acupuncture, shiatsu and applied ki-

nesiology with no success. He also contemplated back surgery.

Then, he met Esther Gokhale and learned her method of using healthy posture to relieve pain.

"Before beginning treatment with Esther, I hadn't experienced a day or night without pain in over a decade," he said.

He never thought the method would be effective so quickly.

"After working with Esther, I saw a remarkable improvement almost immediately. It changed my life. It

gave me back my ability to be physically active and live without pain. I have an immense amount of gratitude to her," he said.

Gokhale said she believes the root of chronic back pain, as well as neck, hip, and knee pain, is bad posture.

"Most back pain is addressable, in my experience. The only exception is irreversible genetic abnormalities, which are rare," she said.

Gokhale teaches people how to reestablish their natural posture and maintain it through movement. She borrows ideas from other disciplines including the Alexander technique, Feldenkrais method, Pilates, yoga and dance, among others. Ultimately, the Gokhale method is a way for people to return to the posture they had when they were babies — what is in their genes, she said.

Gokhale focuses on lengthening and straightening muscles as opposed to shortening and straightening them. Patients focus on simple

changes, including sitting with the tail bone out, as opposed to tucking the pelvis in.

Halle Agdassi, a physician at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation, has been referring patients to Gokhale for several years.

"It is a tool that people can use on an everyday basis to sit, stand and carry themselves. It's an easy method to use in daily life. All my patients who have had lower back pain and used her method have had success," she said.

Gokhale's anthropological and anatomical approaches set her method apart, according to Agdassi.

Traveling in Africa, Europe, Asia and South America, Gokhale studied traditional cultures that have low incidences of muscle and joint problems, and incorporated her observations into her technique. Clients emulate photographs of people with correct postures from around the world.

"The less industrial a country, the more likely you are to find people with correct posture and movement. In Chad, 5 percent of people suffer from back pain sometime in their lives; in the United States that number is 80 percent. My mission in life is to close that gap," Gokhale said.

She also uses medical literature and anatomical arguments to back her ideas. Western and eastern approaches reflect both her interest in alternative medicine and her scientific background. After graduating from Princeton University with a degree in biochemistry, Gokhale studied acupuncture at San Francisco College of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.

But her lifelong dedication to understanding and addressing the root of back pain began when she had back problems of her own. When pregnant with her first child, Gokhale suffered from sciatica, with pain beginning in the hip and continuing down the leg. She underwent back surgery, but for years thereafter she continued to have recurring back pain.

She studied in Paris with yoga teacher Noelle Perez in Aplomb, a French movement-re-education technique that focused on posture; then traveled and studied the various cultures with low incidence of back pain.

"I teach people to return to the normal shape of their spine and preserve it in their movement. Almost every person who takes my class grows one-quarter to one-half an inch from straightening out their spine," she said.

To achieve maximum success, her method must be taught using three components: the kinesthetic, visual and intellectual, she said.

"These three channels allow people to not only feel the difference in (continued on page 22)



Esther Gokhale, left, helps Chloe Kamprath to bend using correct posture during a private session.

focus on simple

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Health & Fitness

Back pain

(continued from page 21)

posture, but to see the differences in images and understand the anatomy behind it," she said.

Images are vital in learning correct posture, she said. "We're little monkeys, we copy each other," she added.

People are also intellectually driven, and knowing the reasoning behind what someone is doing motivates people to work harder, she said.

"I think her method is very sound anatomically, kinesthetically and clinically. I like that she uses an anthropological basis for her work and

incorporates yoga and dance," client Davidson said.

Agdassi believes in Gokhale's method so strongly that she is spearheading a medical study to evaluate its benefits in people who have chronic low-back pain and have failed physical therapy.

Gokhale has written a book "Eight Steps to a Pain Free Back" that she hopes will be in stores by spring 2008. It explains her method step by step, with the aid of more than 1,000 images. Her book is the first in a series titled, "Remember When It Didn't Hurt." She plans other books to focus specifically on sitting and sleeping without hurting the back.

She currently hopes to teach children to develop proper posture at an early age. "Early in life is when the neural pathways in the brain are set for sitting and other important positions. I want people to develop healthy habits as soon as possible," she said.

Her method is effective for people of all ages, she said.

Davidson agrees. "Her work is both down-to-earth and elegant, and has helped me in ways I could not even have imagined. I believe she has the ability to help a great number of people of all ages."

■ **Editorial Intern Rotem Ben-Shachar** can be e-mailed at rben-shachar@paweekly.com.

Navigating health care

Four books offer advice for getting what you want and need

by The Health Library



a worthwhile tool for all of us who are health-care consumers.

People with chronic diseases and disabilities are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to obtaining the health care they need. The cost of health insurance coverage continues to escalate, even among those whose employers offer group plans. For those with a pre-existing condition, insurers often refuse to cover at all, or, if they do cover, they severely restrict that coverage.

A new book called *Health Insurance Resources: A Guide for People with Chronic Disease and Disability* (2nd ed. Demos, 2007), by Dorothy E. Northrop, Stephen Cooper and Kimberley Calder, is an excellent resource for those with chronic conditions who face insurance challenges.

In just over 200 pages, this book covers much ground. It features chapters on managed care and indemnity plans, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security disability insurance, along with information about an alphabet soup of acronyms: ERISA, HIPAA, and COBRA — all laws that ensure health-care rights.

The book also provides listings of other resources: contact information for insurance companies, pharmaceutical assistance programs and state programs for children's health insurance, to name a few. An invaluable resource for those with chronic conditions and for health care professionals, the book increases understanding of the health care system, including their responsibilities and entitlements.

People who are self-employed or do not have an employer-sponsored group insurance plan face challenges when it comes to obtaining health care insurance. Economist Paul Zane Pilzer, author of *The New Health Insurance Solution: How to Get Cheaper, Better Coverage Without a Traditional Employer Plan* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007), has some answers.

The book begins with an executive summary outlining the author's two basic solutions for health-care

coverage. First, he believes most healthy people under age 60 should purchase individual or family health insurance policies themselves. Second, he advocates participation in Health Savings Accounts (HSAs), whether it comes via an employer-provided group plan or an individually purchased policy.

The rest of the book provides details supporting these assertions. Readers learn about their legal rights to health insurance through ERISA, COBRA and HIPAA and how to buy their own low-cost health insurance plan.

The best options for those of us with good company plans are also outlined, such as what to do if a family member has a significant health issue, how to get affordable medical care when you are over 55 and how to save money on prescription drugs.

The second section of the book is aimed at business owners. It describes how they can economically provide coverage to their employees, primarily through HSAs and HRAs (Health Reimbursement Arrangements).

For those of us concerned with our ability to obtain and maintain adequate health-care coverage, *The new health insurance solution* offers some intriguing options. It takes complex financial concepts and makes them simple to understand.

The author is clearly enthusiastic about his subject and confident about his opinions. Readers need to carefully consider their individual situations and learn as much as they can before making any financial commitments based solely on this book.

These books, along with many more that can help people better manage their own health care, are on the shelves of the Stanford Health Library. Visit the library for research assistance and information packets prepared free of charge. Branches are located at the Stanford Shopping Center near Bloomingdale's, on the third floor of Stanford Hospital, and on the main level of Stanford's Cancer Center. The Health Library can be contacted at 650-725-8400, <http://healthlibrary.stanford.edu> and e-mail to healthlibrary@stanfordmed.org. ■