

New type of massage is now offered in the county Steppin' on it

By Charity Apple Times-News

Massage therapist Jill Clayton compares it to "doing the hokey pokey." "I get to put my whole self in," Clayton joked as she talked about Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy, a technique that utilizes bars installed on the ceiling and dance-like movements using the feet to massage clients.

The term comes from the words "ashi" for foot and "atsu" for pressure, according to the Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy Web site.

Clayton starts in the seated position and uses one foot to massage clients.

"My feet become my hands," she said. "I use them to put the lotion on and do everything with them that I'd do with my hands." Before the massage begins, Clayton puts on gloves (similar to those that gymnasts use). These are used to keep her grip on the wooden bars. A dab of lotion is applied to her forearm. She uses her fingers to apply that lotion to the soles of her feet and then she gently uses one foot to glide across her client's back.

On this day, the client is Dexter Barbee. He's participated in Oriental Bar Therapy for three sessions now. Barbee said he's enjoyed massage therapy for 15 years.

During a recent session, she apologized to Barbee, saying that she had not warmed her feet up.

"They're going to be chilly," she said.

He didn't seem to mind.

"Jill is one of the top two therapists I've ever been to," he said. "She's willing to try new methods." Barbee likes the new methods like Swedish deep tissue massage, cupping and others, but it is the Oriental Bar Therapy where he finds the most relaxation.

"It really doesn't feel like her feet," he said. "It's amazing." Clayton became certified to practice the Ashiatsu therapy on Dec. 6, 2005, and she is the only therapist in Alamance County currently using this method of massage.

She actually became interested in Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy as a way to help herself. It takes a lot of hand strength to become a massage therapist. Some people develop carpal tunnel and other problems because of the strenuous use of their hands.

"A lot of therapists will burn out in two years," she said.

The wear and tear on massage therapist's hands and muscles is the primary reason Ruthie Piper Hardee created the technique in the late 1990s. At first, Hardee said, "I got a million doors slammed in my face." That's because this Asian tradition had a history of being associated with prostitution houses in Asia.

While living in Tampa, Fla., Hardee introduced the art of Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy to doctors and interns. In 1999, she went public with it, and now there are 2,000 graduates of this massage therapy in the United States and 36 internationally.

"(Because of methods like this), turnover is down and it doesn't hurt as much," she said in a phone interview Saturday afternoon from her home in Colorado. "The art is very much alive and well." Hardee, the daughter of two missionaries (a doctor and a nurse) remembers seeing Ashiatsu (the Japanese term means more than massage; it's a culture, a way of life), in an Asian hotel when she was just 13 years old. At the time, she didn't know what she was witnessing.

She filed that memory away until, 20 years later, she was in massage schools in California. Then, she began to wonder "now when do we get to use our feet?" Regular massage schools, she soon discovered, don't use this method.

HARDEE TOOK FIVE years to research and develop the method. She trains other massage therapists to do Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy with either one or both feet. Joan (pronounced Jo Ann) Rotramel, of Archdale, is the only authorized instructor in North Carolina and South Carolina. She taught Jill Clayton.

"I saw an article on the method and immediately decided that I wanted to learn how to do this," Rotramel said on Monday morning.

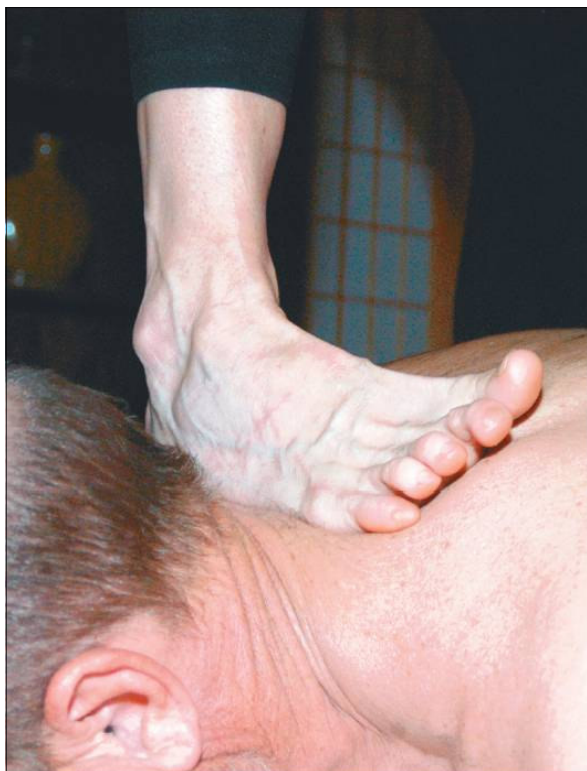
Massage therapists, she said, can apply up to 50 pounds of their client's weight and must weigh no more than 150 pounds.

"It's a win-win situation," she said of the massage therapy. She's found that through this method, the therapists develop proper posture and are able to perform better.

"Most of the time, we're bending over at the knees," she said. "They're killing themselves. Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy allows you to stand up straight and use your muscles to help the client. It's as good for us as it is the client." Rotramel has trained 45 students so far and hopes that the interest in the Oriental therapy will continue.

THE BIGGEST compliment a client can give therapists like Clayton, Hardee said, is to say things like "I feel like I've been stretched out like a giant." "The therapy is a beautiful elongation of the spine," she said. "We've had people tell us that this is the best massage they've ever gotten." It may look easy, but Hardee cautioned that only trained professionals should try Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy.

"You shouldn't just get up on your husband's back and walk around," she said. "You could cause kidney damage and rib damage. It's important to go to a trained professional for this." To find out more information about Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy, go to the Web site: www.deepfeet.com. Jill Clayton's studio is at her home; for more information about it, call (336) 567-0558.



Photos by Julie Basile / Times-News Jill Clayton works on massage therapy patient Dexter Barbee at her studio in Burlington. She's using Ashiatsu oriental bar therapy, for which she has recently gotten her certification. One foot is on a stool, the other is used for massage.