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The practice offers unique benefits and is growing fast

# Making moves in health world

A relative newcomer to the health and fitness scene is already making waves, thanks to its permanent solutions to people's physical problems.

Although it has yet to go professional in Hong Kong, stretch therapy's unique benefits and diverse range of beneficiaries means that its practitioners can enjoy booming business in years to come. Ho Sik-hon, director of Basic Massage.Stretch, said the difference between stretch therapy and other therapies such as physiotherapy and massage therapy was sometimes blurred.

"In my philosophy, massage and stretch therapy should involve an in-depth understanding of human anatomy, human physiology and pathology, which is pretty much the same as physiotherapy," Mr Ho said.

However, he said while medical professionals were responsible for dealing with clinical conditions, both massage and stretch therapists should excel in tackling pre- and post-clinical care and the prevention of injury and re-injury.

Mr Ho said practitioners should ideally obtain both massage and stretching skills, as these worked best together.

"While stretching can elongate tensed muscles and enable muscles to work [at their] optimum length, massage can alleviate muscle tension and tone the muscles [at their] optimum working condition," he said.

Another difference between the role of a stretch therapist and that of masseur is that the former follows a process that takes time and incorporates several stages of treatment.

"Over that time, we try to create a permanent solution for the person's problem, [whereas] a massage is often viewed as a temporary reliever," said Daniel Vart, stretch therapist at PhysioCentral in Central.

"The main difference between stretch therapy and all forms of massage is that we affect the length of the soft tissue and decompress the joints in order to reduce symptoms," Mr Vart said.

He said clients using stretch therapists' services were extremely diverse, ranging from professionals such as doctors, pilots and bankers to frequent travellers, professional and amateur sportspeople, children and pregnant women.

## STRETCH THERAPY

### Key players

- Physiotherapist
- Osteopath sports scientist
- Neuromuscular therapist
- Pilates practitioner
- Occupational therapist

Some clients are referred directly by physiotherapists.

"During the middle of the day, we have many ladies of leisure looking to improve their posture and flexibility, while at weekends, 50 per cent of our clients are golfers preparing themselves for their upcoming game," said Chris Watts, head therapist at Stretch Asia, whose clients mainly consist of corporate finance personnel.

Despite a broad client range, Hong Kong has very few stretch therapists, which means that practitioners enjoy a niche in the market.

"There are very few of us, so I feel that

### Jargon

- **Thoracic kyphosis** outward curvature of the thoracic section of the spine which is often caused by a forward head position and/or forward weight bearing
- **Anterior pelvic rotation** a forward and downward rotation of the pelvis, caused by excessive or prolonged hip flexion due to too much sitting down, leading to shortened hip flexors and quadriceps
- **Torque** a lateral rotation or twist in the pelvic region often caused by hip rotator imbalances
- **Scoliosis** an "S" curvature of the spine usually caused by muscle imbalances (can be hereditary)
- **Lumbar lordosis** inward curvature of one of the lower sections of the spine often caused by core weaknesses and/or anterior pelvic rotation
- **Scapular flare** upward and lateral positioning of the shoulder blades, often caused by tension through the muscles of the chest and neck and weakness through the muscles in between the shoulder blades

the opportunities to expand and develop are vast," Mr Vart said.

"There are more deadlines, with less work-life balance, and therefore some great opportunities to move our services inside big corporate offices," said Mr Watts, adding that the business environment in Hong Kong was as good as it had ever been for body work of all types.

"We are talking closely with several big financial houses, as I do corporate workshops on health and well-being and 'stretch your office' sessions, and these events are becoming more popular," he said.

Despite a surge in interest, the profession is not without its challenges, one of which is creating an identity.

Mr Vart said limited awareness of the therapy meant that it was still bracketed with yoga, Pilates and other types of alternative therapy.

Mr Ho said one answer would be to earn the public trust and confidence by going professional, and establishing a formal registration system for stretch therapy.

"While there are not any recognised training programmes in Hong Kong, all 'therapists' can work without any licences or registration, and massage and stretch have yet to be recognised as a form of treatment," Mr Ho said.

Therapists can get training overseas, usually in the United States, Britain or in the European Union, where registration systems are offered.

As a result, would-be practitioners take part in in-house training programmes, internships or train under top-notch specialists such as Aaron Mattes, the inventor of Active Isolated Stretching.

Mr Watts teaches internships of up to three months that give people a taste of what it's like to work in the profession.

Mr Ho, who also provides training and placements facilitated by physiotherapists and medical doctors, said: "The training consists of lectures on anatomy, physiology and pathology, and 500 plus hours of hands-on placement."

With training and experience up their sleeves, new stretch therapists had plenty of career prospects within this growing market, and should not find attracting clientele a problem, he added.

Mr Vart explained: "There are very few players in the industry at the present time; it's a case of being a big fish in a small pond and, with increased awareness, the pond could grow."



Daniel Vart says he aims to create permanent solutions to long-term problems. Photo: Jonathan Wong

## All In A Day's Work: Restoring the balance

**Daniel Vart is a stretch therapist at PhysioCentral where he uses his skills to transform the quality of his clients' lives**

I work in a company called PhysioCentral with one other stretch therapist, three physiotherapists and a paediatric physiotherapist.

We try to create an environment whereby someone can walk into the clinic and experience the type of therapy that they need all in the same place.

We feel that, with such a diversity of background knowledge and expertise within one clinic, we are able to help most people.

I have worked in the health and fitness industry for 8½ years; I was a personal trainer for five of those years and have been a stretch therapist now for 3½ years.

Using my five years of experience as a personal trainer, I can combine stretch therapy with appropriate and effective muscle rebalancing and postural conditioning exercises.

If a joint is overstretched it becomes unstable, which is why it is necessary to combine the stretching with the rebalancing.

In stretch therapy, unlike physiotherapy, we do not diagnose injuries; we simply assess and then work to protocols, as opposed to working on one

specific area. I work alongside physiotherapists and we often refer cases to each other and sometimes work together on the same case.

The first thing we perform when a client comes to us is an overall assessment to find out more about the person in terms of things like general health, injury history and pain levels (if any), as well as performing a postural analysis to discover possible discrepancies in their posture.

We then use these findings to ascertain the possible underlying reasons for the person's ailment and also to formulate an overall treatment plan.

We use stretch therapy protocols, or Active Isolated Stretching, to begin to decompress the body.

It is our aim to create a permanent solution to a long-term problem, [which] is why rebalancing the body is so vital.

A typical working day can be as long as 10 to 12 hours; personally, I work from 10am and am available up until 8pm.

The work is very physical and can be extremely taxing on your body as a therapist, and I would definitely say some degree of overall fitness and strength is required.

A working day can involve treating anywhere between four and nine patients in a day. Sessions are usually an hour long, but

we can perform sessions lasting up to two hours if required. We generally don't work for longer than five hours in a row, as five hours of standing up and stretching people without a break is exhausting.

As well as the physical challenge, the job can be mentally stimulating.

It is your job to figure out the best possible course of treatment for each individual and their reason for visiting.

In some cases, the person wishes to increase mobility or improve an injury in time to compete in a marathon in several weeks' time, or, in other cases, the person wishes to reduce the pain that they are getting from their chronic migraine headaches as soon as possible. So the mental challenges are numerous – not to mention the paperwork. The satisfaction comes when you can make a difference to someone's quality of life.

I had a case a while ago where a lady had been involved in two major car accidents and broken most of the bones in her body, and had been in pain in several places for almost 15 years. After working together for just over three months, we were able to eradicate her pain completely and greatly improve her posture and quality of life. This is the best part of the job, and the reason that I do it.

Susie Gyöppös

# Size matters in discipline that deals with abstraction

Martin Donovan

When groups of engineers are pressed to explain to a layperson how the challenges they face differ from those of other engineering disciplines, they tend to seize on the notion of size.

Electronics engineering involves working with components and circuits that can be minuscule and not even visible to the naked eye, while civil engineers have the task of working with large-scale structures: from bridges and roads, to tower blocks and land reclamation.

For some it brings to mind Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in which the miniature folk of Lilliput use their civil engineering skills to harness Lemuel Gulliver when he is washed ashore. When Gulliver travels to the land of the giants, the Lilliputian engineering analogy is reversed, and our hero takes on the scale of a component. Now, in an age of advanced technology, scale and how space can be saved still matters in electronics engineering.

"Students coming on to our courses have probably never observed an electron; they need a mindset that understands you may have to deal with an object you can't hold in your hand. It's a high abstraction level," said Dr Li Chi-kwong, deputy chairman of the Electronics Discipline Advisory Panel of the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers (HKIE) and associate professor at Hong Kong Polytechnic University's department of electronic and information engineering.

Abstract it may be, but electronics stays close to us physically more than we care to think, whether it be inside watches, mobile phones, other hand-held communication devices or the television remote control, and inside items the size of household

## ELECTRONICS ENGINEERING



Printed circuit boards are everywhere

appliances and computer hardware, to circuit boards on aircraft, missile-defence systems and satellite communications.

With the emphasis on tiny, intricate systems forming a part of the big picture, electronics engineers have become eager exponents of the "people person" school of engineering. Innovation and getting systems to function require teamwork, while explaining often unseen, abstract concepts demands good presentation skills in front of investors, designers, salespeople, fellow engineers and the wider public.

In the case of Jolly Wong, a member of the Electronics Discipline Advisory Panel of the HKIE and chief telecommunications engineer for the Hong Kong Police Force's information systems wing, it means leading

a team of 300 electronics engineers, technicians and other specialists to ensure frontline police officers can respond to incidents and that they know how the latest electronics can be configured for use in the fight against crime.

"In the past an electronics engineer would be working independently," Mr Wong said. "But today you always have to make collective professional judgments. So you have to be a team player. Whether you're working on R&D, building up a project or installing equipment, you need teammates who may be from very different backgrounds and disciplines."

The three main industries electronics engineers work in are telecoms, manufacturing, and the testing and development of consumer electronics. Electronic products abound in our shops and are hidden away in the field of R&D carried out by ventures based in Hong Kong Science Park. Hong Kong has been at the forefront of innovation and big concerns such as Cathay Pacific Airways, CLP Power and the government value electronics engineering graduates among their specialists. The HKIE reckons about 70 of the 150 companies at the science park are electronics ventures.

World-class innovation has already been seen with Motorola's microprocessor – DragonBall, which was designed in Tai Po with a PolyU electronics graduate as a leading member of the development team.

"This has had an impact on the world," PolyU's Dr Li said. The semiconductor – roughly the width of a man's thumbnail – is the "brain" in many hand-held computers.

Alan Mok, a member of the HKIE's Electronics Discipline Advisory Panel, said: "Hong Kong is so competitive. So in order for you to be a winner, we call for creativity. "Once you are in this field you could be

dealing with a hi-fi, then up a level with PCs, to a bigger level again with systems or even the space shuttle electronic components and smart radar," said Mr Mok, who is also special project general manager for engineering and operations at SmarTone-Vodafone.

"There are no boundaries. We really are in the forefront of technology and have a greater sphere for development and innovation."

When a layperson feels he can cope with more than Swiftian notions of size, engineers point to how Moore's Law has excelled itself and changes in the field of electronics are becoming more frequent. Gordon Moore is a co-founder of Intel and in 1965 observed that the number of transistors that can be crammed on a circuit board doubles every two years. His theory has been manna from heaven for electronics engineers ever since.

"When people think about electronics they think about state of the art," Mr Wong said. That would mean an electronics engineer would have a good sense of lifelong learning.

Dr Li said fuzzy logic was a major area of study, with applications transferred to systems ranging from computer chips in washing machines to temperature controls for buildings. Five universities in Hong Kong offer electronics degrees and the discipline is considered a "pillar" in any engineering faculty. Though at the forefront of the digital revolution, it has a long history as one of HKIE's founding disciplines – back in the days of analogue.

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## On the road to mobile connectivity

Electronics engineers take pride in putting Hong Kong at the cutting edge of innovation. A new challenge facing local engineers has been how to keep notebook users online while in a moving taxi.

"This is a world first for our city and a fair challenge for the electronics engineer," said Alan Mok, SmarTone-Vodafone's special project general manager for engineering and operations.

Mr Mok and his team applied 3G mobile technology to 100 taxis so a

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Alan Mok  
Special project general manager,  
engineering and operations,  
SmarTone-Vodafone

notebook user could plug into a USM modem and use the SmarTone-Vodafone radio network to go online. The engineers and marketers of the product had in mind taxi passengers who wanted to catch up with work while on relatively long taxi journeys; for example, to and from the airport.

"People may ask 'What for?' Well,

time is money and this matches the personality of Hong Kong," Mr Mok said. "It also shows the dynamic things we can do here."

The service was launched in March and the electronics engineers from SmarTone-Vodafone carried out tests around the city to ensure signal quality anywhere from Hong Kong Island to Kowloon and beyond, was good.

"It's not a one or two person job. It's what we call 'end-to-end engineering'. All the team's engineers were involved in this project," Mr Mok said. "We not only had to take care of the engineering; we also had to ensure the whole network would be covered, from installation, maintenance, surveillance and planning."

"We mastered this technique with tests day and night so that we know the coverage, know the user experience and have now put the system live."

Mr Mok would only say that it took "a short period of time" – from inception to last-minute tests – to establish the system. "Providing full coverage is not an easy job, but in this environment we have to be very agile and creative."

"That is another characteristic of electronics engineering," he said. "For civil engineers, the timescale from the inception of a building structure until its completion can be years. When electronics engineers are first given a problem to sort out, you're talking about a few weeks."

Martin Donovan