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**UD'S PRE-PHYSICAL THERAPY MAJORS ARE LEARNING
IMPORTANCE OF MASSAGE IN HELPING ELDERLY**

DAYTON, Ohio — A few blocks from their classrooms and labs, University of Dayton pre-physical therapy majors are using their hands to help the elderly — and their own futures.

Through a pre-physical therapy seminar, students provide hand and arm massages to local nursing home residents at Crystal Care Health Center, 250 Park Drive. In exchange, they gain a “real-life health-care experience you can’t get in the classroom,” explains Sean Gallivan, their instructor.

“We wanted to give our students a hands-on opportunity in managing a community service that uses many of the problem-solving and care-giving skills needed by today’s physical therapist,” says Gallivan, a physical therapist at Miami Valley Hospital. “So a service-learning arrangement was made between us and the nursing home.”

On another, less-clinical level, the course allows two generations who seldom mingle to share time with each other and even develop a relationship of compassion fused by touch, talk and, ultimately, trust.

“Elderly who are institutionalized hardly ever have visitors, let alone young ones who want to massage them and listen to them,” explains Carol Siciliano, UD associate professor of health and sports science who helps teach massage therapy to the students. “This contact is vital to them socially, physically and emotionally.”

Evidence seems to suggest that massage is quite beneficial, especially for the elderly, on many levels, Siciliano says. “Physiologically, it improves circulation, digestion and other bodily functions. Emotionally, the mere fact that you’re touching someone is breaking down an important communication barrier.”

“It was an incredible experience,” attests Emily Humphrey, a senior pre-physical therapy major who completed the course last spring. Humphrey, a member of UD’s first senior pre-physical therapy program class, expects to graduate in May with a bachelor of science degree in education in pre-physical therapy.

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“Just talking with my clients had a positive psychological benefit on them — and me — maybe more so than the massage’s physical benefits,” Humphrey says. “The class gave me the confidence to interact closely with clients when I’m in the real world.”

While the course’s research requirement was challenging — students measured physiological effects of their therapy using professional methods — Humphrey says approaching strangers on such personal terms wasn’t difficult.

“Spending time with my clients was the easiest part of the course,” she recalls. “I’ll never forget one elderly lady who loved to share stories of her family and show me the presents they brought her. My clients had different personalities, just as you would expect, which made the whole thing even more interesting.”

Opportunities for such work-place experiences are rare for pre-PT students, says Gallivan, but essential to their understanding of what lies ahead.

“We can teach students the proper techniques of massage therapy, but we can’t teach them what it is like to interact with a stranger on such an intimate level,” Gallivan explains. “We can’t teach them what it’s like to touch clients and talk with them at the same time. They have to learn to enter their clients’ personal space and make them accept what you have to offer.”

In the senior-level course, now in its second year, students learn proper massage techniques, professional protocol and how to measure vital signs; they also must become familiar with the detailed anatomy of the hand and arm. As teams they submit a formal service proposal to clients, conduct the service and then evaluate its effectiveness, as a professional physical therapist would do. Finally, students must write a professional paper on their findings and present it to faculty and peers for review.

“We want to give them a taste of theory application of massage and knowledge in the research process,” Gallivan explains. “They learn a clinical approach using one-to-one contact with clients that is essential to their careers.”

But the course transcends taking diastolic blood pressures and differentiating the metacarpals from the phalanges. It’s also about nurturing a crucial aspect of the successful patient/health-care giver relationship — trust.

“We tell our students to ‘listen to your clients,’” says Siciliano, a licensed massage –

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therapist who began a massage therapy class for health and sports science students three years ago. “You’re entering their physical world, and you have to work up to the massage. The way you look and speak, what you’re wearing, even the way you smell is important to communicating with your client.”

That pre-PT majors aren’t the course’s only beneficiaries was apparent last semester when Crystal Care residents coined it the “Healing Hands” program.

Humphrey, who will pursue her master’s degree in physical therapy after she graduates from UD, was so inspired by the course that she is creating a campus-wide Healing Hands service club for students, irrespective of major, who are interested in giving massage therapy to the elderly.

“We thought the club would be a great way for other UD students to see what it’s like to work in a health-care environment,” Humphrey explains, “and, at the same time, help others.”

– 30 –

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