

BACK TO TRADITION

A Portland clinic uses traditional Chinese medicine and techniques to challenge the notion that HIV is a death sentence

by Pamela Lyons

“There isn’t much you can do, and you will die in 18 months.” These were the words that Roger Propst heard when he tested positive for HIV. Like many people, Propst was told by this doctor that having HIV essentially meant a death sentence. Propst tested positive in 1984.

After his diagnosis, Propst said, he decided he wouldn’t let the virus kill him. “I saw things that were miracles,” he said about friends who had lived for long periods with HIV or full-blown AIDS.

The idea that people with HIV or AIDS can live long-term is just beginning to make inroads into Western medical practices. There are other approaches to taking care of people with HIV that begin with the basic assumption that the affected person is going to live.

The staff at the Immune Enhancement Program, at 2009 SE Hawthorne St., cares for people with HIV or AIDS using this approach. The program, which is part of the Institute for Traditional Medicine, serves about 130 people in Portland. For \$100 each month, a client will receive Chinese herbs that have been especially formulated for HIV-related conditions, acupuncture and massage therapy.

Subhuti Dharmananda, director of ITM, said the Portland program mirrors one in San Francisco, which was developed after a 1986 study showed the effectiveness of Chinese herbs in easing conditions due to HIV infection, such as diarrhea or loss of appetite. “Overall, people say they feel better [when they take the herbs],” Dharmananda said.

It can take up to three months for many clients to notice health improvements, Dharmananda said. Propst said he felt effects from the treatment after the first few days. “I had what I call a ‘healing crisis’ after my first acupuncture treatment. I knew this would make me feel better,” he said.

In 1986, Dharmananda was teaching a private class in Chinese herbal medicine in Berkeley, California. The AIDS crisis was into its fifth year, and Western medicine had not made any breakthroughs in finding effective treatments. Dharmananda decided that as part of his class, he’d have his students test herbal combinations on people with HIV or AIDS to see what effects they would have.

Out of the 20 people who took specific Chinese herbs in the study, 19 had significant health improvement after eight months, Dharmananda said. Some had gained weight and had an increased appetite, others’ digestive problems were cleared up.

An article about the study’s results in a San Francisco sexual minority paper generated many responses from people who were looking for relief

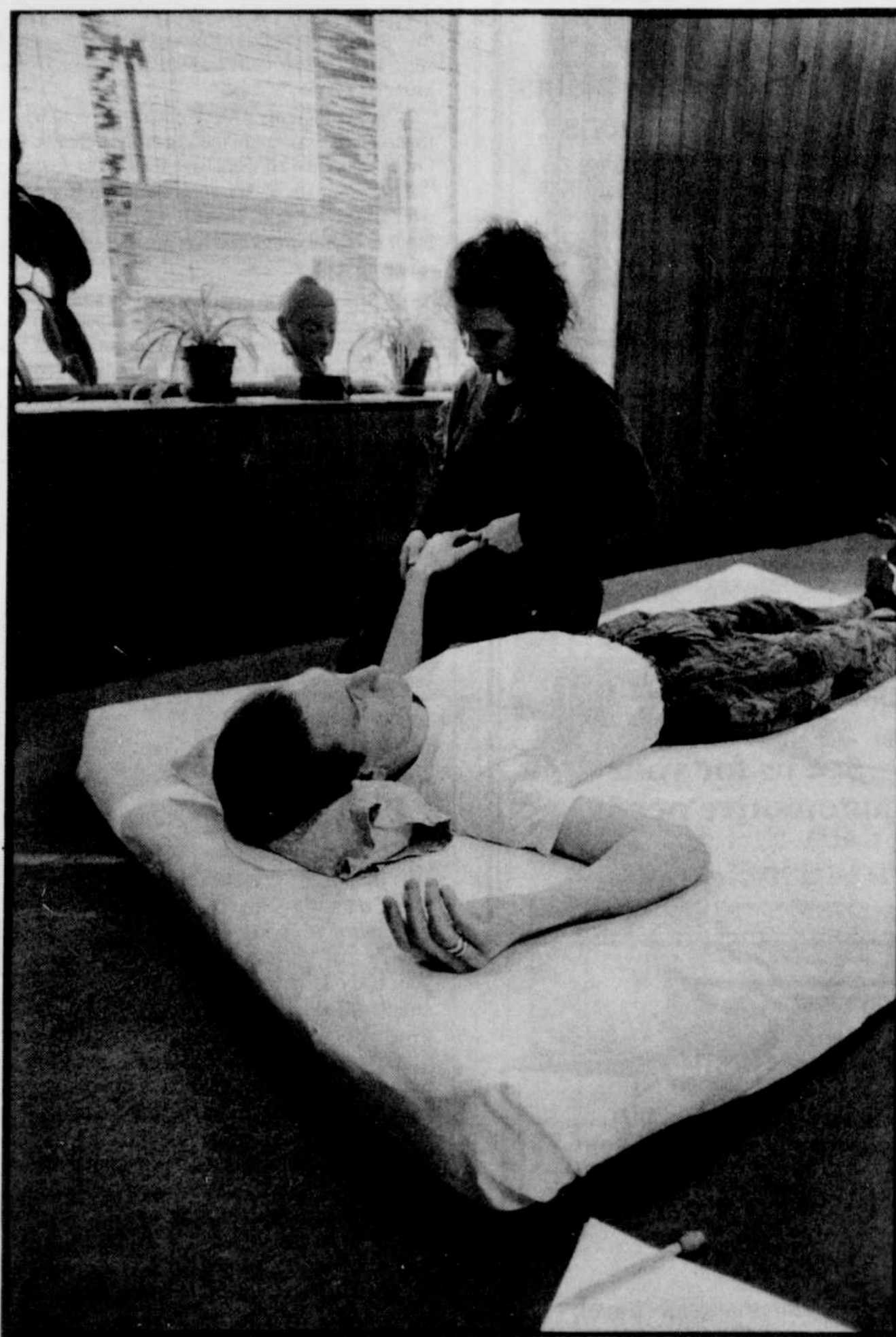


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

from HIV-related conditions. Based on the results and the interest, Dharmananda opened the Immune Enhancement Program in San Francisco to treat people with Chinese herbs. That clinic has grown to serve about 250 people. A 12-week study at the San Francisco clinic, in the fall of 1990, verified the findings of the first study.

Dharmananda opened the Portland IEP clinic in 1992. A survey of clients who had stayed with the program for at least a year showed that the health of most improved or stayed the same. Those clients whose health worsened usually developed opportunistic infections. “Since many of these

individuals have been hospitalized with opportunistic infections prior to entry into IEP, and since published one-year survival rates for such patients are about 25 percent, this demonstrates that the Chinese medical program is likely having a life-prolonging effect while also providing improved quality of life for the majority of participants,” Dharmananda concluded in a study summary.

Many people who are currently in the program back up the results of these studies.

“Within two weeks, I began to feel better,” said Cheryl Brown, who entered the program in August 1993. Along with being HIV positive, Brown had

been in a car accident in May of 1992 and had severe back problems. The herbs, acupuncture and massage treatments increased her energy level and helped take away nerve pain in her arm brought on by her back injury.

John Clark, who had AIDS for about three years before he entered the clinic, said the treatments have taken away some severe pain from a nerve disorder in his feet—a condition that leaves him feeling like he has lumps in his socks. Daily acupuncture treatments have taken away about 70 percent of that pain, he said.

Rick Barnett said he took herbs similar to those prescribed in the clinic for about two years before he entered the program. When he stopped taking them on his own, for financial reasons, he said he noticed a big difference in his health. “Basically, I felt like crap,” he said.

When Barnett started going to the clinic and taking the herbs again, he felt almost an immediate improvement. “At my first time with acupuncture, I knew there was something to it,” he said. “It was making me feel very calm.” In the three months that he’s been going to the clinic, his headaches and stomach problems have become less severe.

Most of the clients at the clinic have primary care physicians through places such as Kaiser or Oregon Health Sciences University. Barnett said his doctor at Kaiser is supportive of his attending the IEP clinic. “She’s a little more modernized and open-minded about it than most,” he said.

Dharmananda said some Western doctors are skeptical of traditional Chinese health care, but most don’t discourage people from going to the clinic. “If they have doubts, the main thing they say is that there is no proof,” he said. He said one doctor he talks with feels that going to the clinic is at least “better than doing nothing.”

Traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine approach disease treatment in some different ways, he said. Western doctors tend to try and stop a virus with external means. With AIDS, this means antiviral drugs such as AZT, ddC and ddI. “The Chinese view is to support the normal function of the body,” Dharmananda said.

The puzzle of AIDS is challenging the adaptiveness of both Western and traditional Chinese medicine. Because no cure or vaccine has yet been found for HIV, Western doctors have to look to other methods for care. And because the virus affects the immune system, the Chinese method of supporting the body’s own functions can be problematic. “Medical doctors and traditional Chinese doctors—we’re all a little stumped by it,” Dharmananda said. “It keeps all of us very open to what improvements might come.”

Most IEP clients have gone through Western routes of caring for themselves. Brown was on

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