

'Spiritual touch' therapy adopted by hospitals

by [Brianna Sacks](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue

Sandra Delgado wasn't held much as a child growing up in a stern, Catholic, Mexican immigrant home in Southern California's San Fernando Valley.

A high-stress job and spiking blood pressure led her to discover the healing power of human touch a year ago when she walked into her first Reiki session.

"Reiki saved my life," said Delgado, a lawyer with Bank of America. "I cannot live without it, and I don't want to know what would have happened to me if I hadn't found it."

A spiritual touch practice based on the notion that human hands can redirect one's "life force energy" to heal stress and disease, Reiki is the hottest new Eastern healing practice making its way into the Western health industry.

Like acupuncture, yoga, and other once-fringe practices, Reiki is now viewed by many as an effective, accepted alternative practice in mainstream America, where at least 1.2 million adults have tried it.

But for a treatment that is relatively safe and free of side effects, Reiki has garnered quite a conflicted reputation among health researchers and medical professionals and in the Roman Catholic Church.

"Overall there is a lack of high-quality research on Reiki, and the studies that have been done show conflicting results," a National Institutes of Health report found.

Findings also conclude that there is "no scientific evidence to prove that such energy exists," writes John Killen from the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine.

Yet the therapy is being woven into patient services and treatment programs for people with cancer, fibromyalgia, pain, and depression. American consumers like Delgado have been paying out of their own pockets for Reiki. Costs range from \$40 to \$300 a session, creating a market that hospitals, medical centers, and cancer centers are tapping into.

“People come to me when nothing else is working,” said Marydale Pecora, founder of Param Yoga Healing Arts Center in Chatsworth and a longtime Reiki master who works with Delgado and hundreds of others. “It’s a last-ditch effort to get relief from a medical challenge and to restore balance.”

More than 60 U.S. hospitals have adopted Reiki as part of patient services, according to a UCLA study, and Reiki education is offered at 800 hospitals.

The Healing Touch Professional Association estimates that more than 30,000 nurses in U.S. hospitals use touch practices every year. Pecora said hospitals now seek out Reiki masters and do workshops to train nurses and medical staff.

More medical professionals are signing up and paying about \$175 to go through Reiki training levels 1 and 2, she said. Programs to become a Reiki master teacher last six months to a year and cost \$875.

Yet many medical experts question Reiki’s lack of regulation, especially in a hospital setting.

Reiki critics call the practice “quackery” and claim it is unable to ameliorate symptoms of serious diseases. According to a 2009 article in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, “The serious methodological and reporting limitations of limited existing Reiki studies preclude a definitive conclusion on its effectiveness.”

In 2009, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued guidelines that say “a Catholic who puts his or her trust in Reiki would be operating in the realm of superstition.” The guidelines say it would be inappropriate for Catholic institutions, such as Catholic health-care facilities and retreat centers, to offer Reiki.

Despite the criticisms, Pecora said she can walk into all major hospitals in the San Fernando Valley to conduct Reiki sessions without anyone batting an eye.

“It just works,” she said. Pecora has been practicing Reiki since the 1980s, when energy healing was considered “unique, weird, and no one knew what you were talking about.”

A 2008 American Hospital Association survey found that 84 percent of hospitals reported patient demand as the primary rationale in offering complementary medicine services, including Reiki.

Laura Zempel, a palliative care nurse at Ventura County Medical Center, summed up the core argument: Reiki has a placebo effect. But, she added, the medical center has plans to offer Reiki sessions because patients keep asking for it.

Demand helped create the Integrative Medicine Wing of the Roy and Patricia Disney Family Cancer Center in Burbank, California, four years ago. “Patients are much more demanding for these practices. It’s the reason why our whole department came about in conjunction with Western medicine,” said Vanessa Ortiz, the wing’s program director. —RNS

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