



Magic Hands **By Sarah Lang**

ZEN-LIKE KATH COURTENAY (left) has been working the magic in her hands “ever since I was a little girl and massaged Dad when he had kidney stones. It really seemed to help.”

Now with 12 years’ professional experience, the Far North-born-and-bred 29-year-old’s a walking advertisement for the benefits of life as a massage therapist. Her big brown eyes shine, her skin glows and she radiates calm. Wispishly slender, her work inspires her to keep herself in tip-top condition and, yes, she gets regular massage herself.

Courtenay was 16 when she enjoyed her first kneading so much that she talked her way into a three-year apprenticeship with Auckland masseuse Lolita Knight. That completed and after two years tripping round Europe, Courtenay took up work at posh London women’s spa The Sanctuary (where Princess Diana was once a regular visitor). By 2000 she’d set up her own business: taking her healing hands and massage table to the homes of busy professionals all over London. Her massage card was full for the best part of two years.

Now it’s Auckland’s turn. Home since 2002 and working at exclusive central-city Spa de Serville, Courtenay hatched plans for a new solo venture fitting concentrated studio sessions around workplace visits. In June 2005 Bodywork Solutions was born and now she’s bringing healing hands to deadline-stretched journalists, harassed ad sellers, and even hospital nurses and brain surgeons.

On Thursdays and Fridays ACP Media’s sore shoulders and stiff necks avidly await her

arrival. When the booking email pops up, editors, accountants and assistants alike scramble for either the \$15, 15-minute or \$20, 20-minute spots.

Courtenay breezes into Boardroom IV clad all in comfy whites. You can be stretched on either chair or mat — the gentle twists and extending stretches release lower back and other occupational strain — or luxuriate in a chair massage targeting high-tension areas. The chair looks intriguing. Climbing on frontwards — resting face and shins on cushioned arms — you can feel the relaxation flow from her calmly kneading fingers into those pressure points.

Courtenay’s one of many tapping into a workplace massage boom. Nobody’s collecting figures overall, but Barry Vautier (New Zealand College of Massage teacher and Onsite Massage Association founder) estimates therapists visit 200 Auckland businesses and 500 nationwide on a regular basis. Most companies subsidise or fully fund the service; some simply provide a room and encourage workers to take 15 or 20-minute well-being respites from their desks.

Supportive management makes squeezing healthy habits in the nine to five routine so much easier. Once upon a time at work you got a muffin trolley and Friday drinks — now it’s massage on your coffee breaks in enlightened work places.

Workplace wellbeing was targeted by 2002 amendments to the Health and Safety in Employment Act insisting businesses be proactive about preventing employee stress —

and increasing fines for breaches fivefold. Many a nervous HR manager ummed, aahed and looked into massage therapy as part of more holistic health and safety programmes.

IT’S ALL PART of massage going mainstream. In the last 10 years, the hands-on therapy has shrugged off its dodgy erotic and New Age image and become the fastest-growing form of natural medicine. Now often recommended by GPs as one of the most effective ways of lowering stress levels, it’s recognised as relieving muscle tension, headaches, OOS symptoms and eyestrain; boosting energy, circulation and the immune system.

Given these benefits, unsurprisingly computer-based companies and high-stress, deadline-focussed firms like advertising and media were first on board the mobile massage movement.

Arrianna Saifoloi, who set up major massage collective Mobile Massage Company Corporate Ltd in 2003, says the trend’s begun trickling down from deep-pocket corporates to others such as university departments and construction companies.

MMCC now sends out therapists in 15 main centres for weekly, fortnightly, monthly visits and special occasions. Like most private practitioners, they offer 15-minute sessions targeting the neck, back and shoulders.

The science is straightforward. When you feel anxious your brain sends chemicals (peptides) to your cells that tense up parts of your body, usually the shoulder or neck. Call it the flight or fight response. During massage, blood and oxygen flow to tense areas, repairing tissue and flushing waste products, and relaxing, feel-good endorphins are released.

And the boss should be feeling perky too. Workplace massage has been shown to result in lower absenteeism, increased productivity and boosted staff morale. Damien Stone, client director at Grey Lynn graphic design firm Curious Design, first called in and funded massage therapist Dana Sulikoski a year ago. “The staff fight over who gets to go first — I usually end up last. It really invigorates everyone. We’re a pretty happy crew but I’ve noticed more smiles and less sick days — especially on massage day!”

As the trend continues, more of us may be popping off for a 15-minute perk-up. We all know we should give our bodies a break, but it’s that bit easier when the boss smiles and points to the massage room. ■