



CAN WE DANCE TOWARDS HEALTH?

'The single most important philosophical question we can ask in life is: "Why aren't we dancing in gratitude right now?"' — Nietzsche.

An award-winning German psychologist best known for his work in reducing performance anxiety among school-going children has singled out a Chilean-born method of movement and music as having dramatic positive health benefits.



South American Biodanza trainers Marcelo di Matteo and his wife Patricia Martello at a recent international Biodanza course held at the Natal Spa near Paulpietersburg.

The unique technique, recently imported to and fast becoming popular in South Africa, is known as Biodanza, a personal development and growth system created by Chilean medical anthropologist Professor Rolando Toro Araneda. Studies by Dr Marcus Stueck, of the Institute for Applied Psychology at the University of Leipzig, claim it as a therapeutic intervention that boosts health and well-being.

He found Biodanza had 'major psychological, psychosocial and immunological benefits'.

Stueck has a PhD on methods to reduce performance anxiety among schoolchildren in special situations,

which won him a national (German) prize for research excellence in 1997. He was chanced upon by the SAMJ during a visit to South Africa during December.

He said that his Biodanza research with several scientific colleagues was done among 150 subjects over several years. Stueck says the biggest psychological benefits were reductions in stress and psychosomatic complaints, and improved social abilities, 'especially the ability to enjoy all activities of social life'.

Initial results from an experimental control group study at the Universidad Abierta Interamericana, Buenos Aires, revealed that 13.6% of 59 psychological health and personality variables examined showed significant changes ($p < 0.05$) in the experimental group. This was compared with 4.5% in the control group ($p < 0.05$), measured immediately after completing a 3-month Biodanza course. The comparisons stabilised down to 14% and 9% respectively after a further 3 months without Biodanza.

Qualitative analysis revealed that subjects most often made reference to changes in levels of socially effective functioning (such as higher tolerances to social sensitivity, better communication and improved interpersonal skills, improved affective expression and higher valuing of non-verbal communication).

Subsequent studies at Leipzig university (Germany) after a Biodanza course showed even more dramatic improvements with significant changes among 33% of the experimental group compared with 16.7% among the control group (aerobic). These effects remained stable at the Post 2 measurement after a further 3 months without Biodanza.

Stueck says the changes in the experimental group included higher self-efficacy, improved offensive problem-solving strategies, improved anger regulation, less fear of contact, increased ability to say 'no', more optimism and a more relaxed attitude, greater autonomy and more 'expansive behaviour', and improved psychological health.

It was shown that regular, long-term participation in Biodanza had positive, holistic effects on the experience and behaviour of subjects. He stressed that patients undergoing psychotherapy needed a longer period of time in Biodanza in order to produce positive changes. The study also points out several effects on the biological level: e.g. vegetative stress behaviour (24-hour-monitoring of skin response) and effects on Immunoglobulin A in saliva.



Dr Marcus Stueck of the Institute for Applied Psychology, University of Leipzig.

The unique combination of movement, music and emotion is based on Toro Araneda's development of a theoretical model developed over 40 years and based in biology, physiology, psychology and anthropology. On a practical level, Stueck explained, Biodanza is a group activity for all ages where the participants are invited to dance to music, within their own abilities. The music, specifically chosen by Toro Araneda, evokes feelings of well-being, and above all images of beauty of the participant, the others, the universe. Dances are performed on three levels — individual, in pairs and with the whole group. The idea is not to copy the teacher but to do the exercise according to the feeling evoked by the music. This leads to the expression of the unique identity. Each combination of movement and music is carefully designed to stimulate specific emotions or feelings.

A Biodanza class will typically last one and a half to three hours (shorter



for children's classes) and is generally conducted indoors in bare feet and loose clothing. Separate specialist classes are held for children, the physically and mentally disabled.

Stueck said one of the principal aims of Biodanza was to redress the lack of co-operation between the thinking mind and the heart (feeling centre), as the cortex had a limited capacity to understand the sensation of the whole being. Asked how it could assist the regular GP or physician, he said indications included patients out of biological, psycho-physiological or psychological balance and those displaying psychosomatic illnesses or deprived of social contact.

Toro Araneda's aim was for people to be happy, because when they were happy they were healthy. 'It's suitable for any functional disturbance where medication is not indicated or appropriate,' Stueck added. If a patient was 'simply not enjoying life and has few friends', Biodanza was a highly effective modality in terms of self-regulation and bringing the patient to a higher level of integration with themselves and others.

'It improves their flexibility and adaptability to the different rhythms of their daily lives — which very often are the root cause of many illnesses,' he said.

Biodanza is a 'medicine' with aspects of integration and self regulation. It improved the ability of the body and mental system to reach and get into balance before, during and after



Biodanza trainer Patricia Martello (left) in a partnership exercise with one of several medical doctors on the course.

stressful situations. Biodanza was a 'method to improve the expression of identity'.

Stueck explained that from his own research and having had extensive discussions with Toro Araneda he believed that the biological presence of the identity was in the immune system and that the psychological basis of the identity was 'the unit between thinking, feeling and acting'. From a biological perspective, our limbic hypothalamic systems were in a constant state of flux. Emotion caused changes in this system acting on hormones and neurotransmitters, which in turn influenced the action of the organs in the body.

By using music and movement, Biodanza exercises directly stimulated the sympathetic nervous system and the limbic-hypothalamic system in a natural, positive and healthy way, thus inducing harmony, unity, fluidity, eroticism, pleasure and plenitude. This counterbalanced the excessive negative impacts on the system from stress, anxiety, depression and the sublimation of instinct and self-expression into 'more culturally acceptable' behaviour.

Stueck said there was a common misperception of the instincts as 'somehow base or primitive'. Kudos and prestige were wrongly associated mainly with intellectual development, not instinctual expression.

'Are we any happier for being more intelligent? Do we function better as human beings according to the number of university degrees we possess?' he asked rhetorically. Instinct was so suppressed in the general population that it had a tremendous effect on health and well-being.

'We have education systems where it is more important how to count than how to love, where it is more important to deduct than to express affection — this is not to diminish the importance of literacy and numeracy. But can we not teach how to create lives of meaning and connection, based on



Biodanza trainer Patricia Martello models her own movement to a piece of music.

relationships, as well as how to get a job that will pay the most?' he asked.

Toro Araneda believed that his system helped 'liberate people from the straightjacket of formal traditional education systems that deny them the capacity to feel, to love and to create'. Traditional systems produced a disproportionate number of 'unhappy, unfulfilled and stifled individuals merely prepared to serve their role in the military industrial economy strangling the globe'.

His work dates back to the 1960s in Santiago, Chile, where he began experimenting with music and dance with psychiatric patients. Stueck met Toro Araneda on a scientific mountain-climbing expedition in the Andes, Argentina, in 1995 while researching the behaviour of high-altitude mountaineers.

His research collaborators include the Argentine psychologist Alejandra Villegas, Raul Terren, Veronica Toro and Professor H Schroeder, of the Institute of Applied Psychology, Leipzig University among others.

Weekly classes, co-ordinated by the Centre of Biodanza, South Africa, are held in Durbanville, Rondebosch, Tzaneen and across Gauteng.

Chris Bateman