ive grams of pressure is all it takes. The weight of a nickel.

Wendy Hildreth "lays" her fingers gently on the client's skull and holds them there for a few minutes without saying a word. Suddenly, her eyes light up.

"There you go," she says, as she feels a blocked pathway open up, an imbalance correct itself. She moves her fingers to a spot behind the client's neck and starts again.

Hildreth is practising Craniosacral Therapy (CST), a relatively new alternative therapy that is gaining popularity with athletes, movie stars and the general public. CST addresses imbalances or restrictions in the craniosacral system — the meninges and cerebrospinal fluid that surround and protect the brain and spinal cord. It extends from the bones of the skull, face and mouth, which make up the cranium, down to the sacrum, or tailbone.

By applying light but steady pressure to specific places throughout the system, restrictions will open up and the craniosacral system will be able to function unhindered.

"Who I tell people is we're basically dealing with the central nervous system," Hildreth says. Since the brain and spinal cord are contained within the central nervous system, CST has the potential to address a wide variety of bodily functions and ailments.

Hildreth begins her sessions by establishing a "still point," bringing the client's craniosacral rhythm to a stop for a brief time than letting it restart. She then applies gentle pressure to the "interfaces" between the bones of the skull, releasing the bones so they move freely. "The bones of the skull actually move," Hildreth explains. Many things — a blow to the head, for example — can "lock" the interfaces and prevent movement. "I use the five grams of pressure to release the restrictions and make it move fluid," she says. The idea behind the therapy is that by freeing up blockages in the craniosacral system, undue pressure on the brain and spinal cord is removed and the body's "self-correcting" abilities are restored.

Craniosacral therapy was developed by osteopathic physician John Upledger beginning in the 1970s. During spinal surgery on a patient, Upledger observed a rhythmic movement in the dura mater, the membrane that envelopes the brain and the fact that they actually weren't fixed as doctors had previously thought. Upledger theorized that a hydraulic system of some sort was at work inside what he called the craniosacral system.

As a clinical researcher and professor of biomechanics at Michigan State University in the 1970s and 80s, Upledger conducted studies that supported his theory. For the first time, he and other researchers were able to explain the function of the craniosacral system and show how light-touch therapy could be used to evaluate and treat malfunctions involving the brain and spinal cord.

The doctor went on to form the Upledger Institute to educate the public and healthcare professionals about the benefits of CST. During the last five years, the therapy has gained popularity in treating conditions like

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headaches, neck and back pain, eye problems and motor coordi-
nation difficulties.

It has also been used successfully in treating TMD (temporo-
mandibular joint) syndrome, a painful condition that affects the
jaw. Actress Brooke Shields has used CST to treat her own TMD,
which once made eating and even laughing difficult.

Hildreth, a licensed massage therapist, was trained in cran-
iofacial therapy by Upledger himself, and has completed sev-
eral levels of ongoing training.

"When I started massage
school, I knew I needed to come
out with craniofacial therapy," Hildreth says. "I had no idea
what it was or what it was
about."

Hildreth has trained in
Swedish, deep tissue and myofas-
cial massage, but CST "is defi-
nitely my love," she says.

"When I put my hands on the
body, I'm telling the body: I'm
here to do what you need me
to do," she says. "It's basically
just turning in to the subtleties in
the body and listening to it."

Hildreth explains how the
light touch — the five grams of
pressure — can be so effective.

"The fascia that covers every-
thing, every muscle, is basically a
tissue web," she says. "If I go in
and try to force it to release, I
can't do it. But by applying a
small load over a longer time, it
will give, release and become
more fluid."

Hildreth warns clients before
their first treatment about the
potential side effects.

"The releases that are happen-
ing are deep," she says. "So
there's always a chance of emo-
tions that are trapped being re-
leased, too." She says the 34-40
hours after a treatment "can be
interesting." Most CST treat-
ments take about an hour, ac-
cording to Hildreth. The effects
are subtle, so not everyone will
recognize them at first.

"It depends on how in tune
they are with their body," she
says. Most clients who have 4-6
 treatments in as many weeks
will notice the benefits. "They re-
ally start to build," she says.

"People often fall into a very
relaxed state," she adds. "If noth-
ing else, it does do that." But
through her own training and
the feedback she gets from
clients, Hildreth knows CST does
much more than that.

"During a treatment, there are
things going on between (a
client's) body and my hands," she
says. "It's ensuring what can hap-
pen in that time."