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Has Your Liver Been Liberated?

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Probably the only thing most people care to know about their gurgling inner organs is that they are functioning properly. But for Jean-Pierre Barral, an osteopath practicing in Grenoble, France, the body's vital viscera are like a beautifully complicated timepiece, each part in subtle but perpetual motion relative to the others. "In a single day, your internal organs move 30,000 times," he says. "Your liver alone travels 600 meters."

Problems arise, according to Barral, when a trauma or malfunction puts the mechanism out of alignment. "An organ that loses its mobility can throw the whole organism out of whack," he says. "Our task is to help it get back on track." To that end, Barral, 56, has spent nearly three decades developing the therapeutic technique he calls visceral manipulation.

Here's how it works: using only his hands, Barral coaxes the kidneys, liver, stomach and other soft tissues back to their natural movement by applying soft pressure to the abdomen, thorax and urogenital areas. In this way, he claims to have successfully treated ailments ranging from chronic back and joint pain to indigestion, infection, incontinence, migraines and even impotence and sterility.

Barral came naturally to his vocation. "My grandmother was a healer, and I always liked to touch people," he says. Working as a physical therapist before receiving his osteopathic training in England, he discovered that each internal organ has a capacity to cause pain to the spinal column, whereas conventional osteopathic thinking assumed the opposite. "At the time nobody was talking about manipulating organs," he recalls, "but I kept seeing patients with aches and pains that I could relieve simply by kneading their organs."

Initially, Barral's gentler, hands-on approach met with skepticism. But some in the medical community are starting to recognize its benefits. Visceral manipulation has become part of the standard curriculum at all European osteopathic schools, while seminars in the U.S., Japan and Russia are drawing large crowds. In Grenoble, where osteopaths treat a surprising 25% of the city's population, nearly one-third of Barral's patients have been referred by mainstream doctors. "We often get called in when regular medicine can't do anything," he says. "That's where being an organ mechanic is a beautiful thing. There aren't many of us, and there are a lot of organisms out there that need help."

--By Tala Skari/Paris