

Healing Touch
By TERRY ELLIS
Contributing Editor

Tiffany Fields, Ph.D., has been talking about the healing and nurturing power of touch regularly to journalists for 10 years. The first coverage chronicling her research on the benefits of massage to premature babies appeared in 1986, in the science section of the *New York Times*. Since then, she's done *Today*, *Good Morning America*, and most recently the August cover story for *Life* magazine.

She keeps on talking, and never appears to tire of the subject, because that's the only way to get the message out to the public — the only people she believes can change the medical, educational and economic tides that have risen against the ideas she has proven scientifically.

"We do about 18 magazine articles a week, four television interviews and eight radio spots," says Fields, whose home base is the Touch Research Institute in Miami. Last week she was off to Indonesia to speak about her favorite topic at conferences there.

Fields was in the middle of her master's thesis on massage and premature babies at the University of Massachusetts 22 years ago when she gained her own experience with its benefits. Her daughter, Cory, now 21, was born premature. Fields' research has shown that premature babies who are massaged three times a day for 10 days gain weight 47 percent faster and blossom overall in alertness and responsiveness compared to babies who don't receive the treatment. She even translates that into dollars and cents: An average savings of \$10,000 per child by reducing the hospital stay six days. With 470,000 premature babies born in the United States each year, that amounts to \$4.7 billion.

Now her ongoing research has shown the benefits of massage in an A to Z roster of illnesses, she says, including asthma, HIV, hyperactivity, autism, diabetes and severe burns. Fields even discovered that grandparents who volunteered to massage premature babies reaped health benefits themselves. Since many older people are uncomfortable with receiving a massage, giving one actually was more relaxing to them.

"It benefits them for the same reason it benefits everyone: It relaxes them, causes them to produce more endorphins [naturally occurring pain suppressors], and their immune systems functions better," says Fields.

An even wider application of Fields' research is in the area of promoting health and development, especially for children.

At the nursery school affiliated with TRI, children enjoy a daily 15-minute massage that relaxes them, makes them more alert and helps them sleep more deeply. This practice runs counter to the trend in many schools, even preschools, where teachers and officials fear lawsuits, says Fields. For example, the National Education Association, which represents 2 million teachers, adopted the slogan "Teach, don't touch."

Fields disagrees. Her research comparing different cultures has convinced her that what America needs is more warm, human touch.

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Title: Healing Touch
Subject: World Tribune 09/12/97 n.3156 p.16 WT970912p16
Author: Terry Ellis
Keywords: December Fields Healing Institute July People Professionals Research Tiffany Touch
Tribune World Worldview