

## *Drumming: to the beat of life*

by Barry Bittman, MD

Life begins with a symphony.

From the movement of blood traversing our arteries and veins to the rhythmical tympani of the heartbeat that conducts the orchestra of life, the sounds of mother's body remain comforting throughout our existence.

It is not surprising therefore, that drumming, one of the oldest healing rituals known to mankind, is now receiving heightened interest as a complementary therapeutic strategy in the conventional medical arena.

According to Remo D. Belli, President, Remo Inc., a renowned leader and innovator in the world drumming movement, "Music making, as a component of wellness, may sound to some like a new idea, when in fact, it even preceded Aristotle or Plato's writings on the subject."

The oldest drum was most likely the human body itself, or a piece of bark to tap on. It was probably the infatuation with producing wonderful sounds around the camp fire that beckoned others to join in, and share their rhythms. For ancient civilizations, drumming must have inspired a sense of community and belonging. Essentially, it enabled people to work together in a manner that resonated with the soul. Actually, it's no different today.

Drum circles are quickly catching on throughout the world for the same reasons they flourished thousands of years ago. This fascinating activity engenders a sense of personal and group worth through self-expression, sharing, and contributing to the whole. A living metaphor of our capacity as humans to join forces to work together effectively, drum circles remind us of our greatest synergistic potential.

According to Barbara J. Crowe, RMT-BC, Director of Music Therapy at the University of Arizona, Tempe, the benefits of group drumming are based on several basic principles:

1. Response to rhythm is basic to human functioning, making these percussion activities and techniques highly motivating to people of all ages and backgrounds.
2. Pure percussion activities are interesting and enjoyable to all people regardless of ethnic and cultural background, musical preferences, or age range, making these activities useful in creating groups that are fun and positive for a wide variety of people.
3. Participation in active group percussion experiences has physical benefits including sustained physical activity, relaxation, and use of fine motor skills.
4. A strong sense of group identity and a feeling of belonging is created because participants are actively making music together, and because the sustained repetition of the steady beat acts to bring people together physically, emotionally, and mentally (rhythmic entrainment)

5. Percussion activities can be done with little or no previous musical background or training, making these experiences accessible to all people.

While these benefits present more than enough justification for incorporating drumming into conventional health care, the next step was clearly to determine whether group percussion activities actually produced measurable biological effects.

With this in mind, I recently joined forces with Lee Berk, DrPH and David Felten, MD, PhD to answer this question through a comprehensive research project that was performed at our Mind-Body Wellness Center.

Our design was simple. Subjects were assigned to one of two groups. The first participated in drumming sessions for one hour, while the second, or control group, spent their time reading. Blood was sampled before and after each session.

Data were analyzed at our hospital, at the University of Iowa, and at Loma Linda University School of Medicine. While the final results are just coming in, preliminary analysis now appears to show that after thousands of years, science is finally validating the wisdom of ancient drummers.

This is the first study to show that subjects who drummed manifested clear-cut boosts of immune function, especially for cells that seek out and destroy tumors and viruses. Supported through funding by Remo Drums, Inc., this landmark project represents a major breakthrough in our understanding of the biological effectiveness of drumming as a healing strategy.

While our team of scientists is charged with excitement about these initial findings, Arthur Hull, one of the leading drum circle facilitators in the world seems to have known it all along. In his book, *Drum Circle Spirit*, he commented, “While being a tool for unity, the drum can also be a tool for personal transformation and healing.”

Most scientists would agree that our ability to drum appears to be hard-wired into our genetic code. Throughout the ages, it has served us well as a means of facilitating harmony, enhancing rapport and cooperation, and serving as a joyous means of expression. We now also know that drumming is a genuine promoter of a sound immune system. Its timeless beat is certain to resonate well into the future— Mind Over Matter!

