

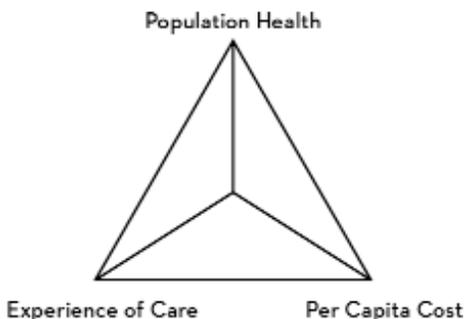
## Yoga Therapy: Meeting the Needs of The Triple Aim

By Kristine Kaoverii Weber and Brett Sculthorp

The MGH Benson-Henry Institute recently released a cohort study<sup>1</sup> showing that relaxation practices like yoga postures, breathing practices, and meditation can reduce the need for medical care by 43%. A February 2015 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)<sup>2</sup> cited yoga as one of the most commonly utilized complementary and integrative medicines in America. While a growing number of researchers and federal agencies like the CDC and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) acknowledge the medical benefits of these practices, the question of how to integrate yoga into the healthcare system remains largely unaddressed by these agencies.

For those immersed in the yoga world, it can feel like we live in an alternate universe when it comes to healthcare. Some yoga professionals don't want anything to do with the system—citing insurance headaches, corruption, and obsolete conceptual models—while others find it difficult to get the medical community to take the therapeutic benefits of yoga seriously. The reality is that until yoga therapy is integrated into the healthcare system, individuals and populations will continue to be excluded from its potential to significantly improve their health.

### The Triple Aim



Professionals all over the country are offering yoga therapy in healthcare settings, which means there is a precedent for integrating yoga. However, what is lacking is a planned, coordinated effort between yoga therapists and healthcare organizations. Coordinated efforts typically

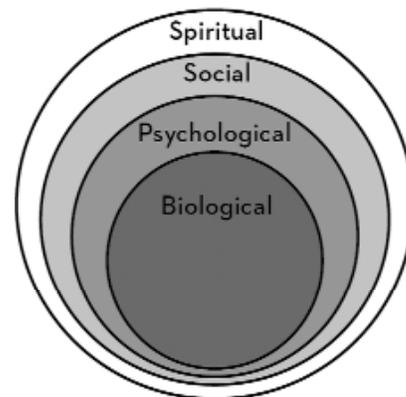
arise from grounded conceptual models. The Triple Aim<sup>3</sup> may be just that model. It is a framework that can help us think about why and how yoga should be integrated into the healthcare system. Launched in 2007 by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), a nonprofit focused on testing new models of care, best practices, and effective innovations, The Triple Aim intends to optimize health system performance by serving three goals: improving the health of populations, reducing costs, and improving patient experience of care.

“Value” in healthcare is a buzzword, and it's not only about saving money. Patients deserve to have safe, appropriate, and effective care at affordable costs.<sup>4</sup> The Triple Aim is now widely looked to as a framework for creating better healthcare, partly because it was adopted into the Affordable Care Act in 2010. Let's explore how The Triple Aim could be utilized as a reference for mainstreaming yoga therapy into healthcare by looking at each of its three goals through the lens of yoga.

### 1. Yoga Therapy for Improving the Health of Populations

Focusing on population health is essential to realizing The Triple Aim. Yoga therapy can be adapted to a range of populations. From children to seniors, from the chronically ill to at-risk youth, from hospitals to community health centers, yoga therapy can address a range of needs in any population or organization and facilitate the development of a “culture of health”<sup>5</sup> in a community. Unlike massage, chiropractic, or other complementary and integrative medicine (CIM) modalities that require one-on-one intervention, yoga therapy can be provided in group settings and practiced at home. It is accessible, adaptable, low risk, low cost, and has a broad and growing research base. It has the potential to be integrated into any number of services—for example, a mental health outpatient program at a community mental health center, a weight loss program in a health department, and an employee wellness program at a hospital.

### Biopsychosocialspiritual Model



The healthcare system is complex, and health outcomes, even more so. Health outcomes are determined by many different factors including the social determinants of health, new kinds of epidemics, and increased rates of chronic disease. The biopsychosocialspiritual model is considered the gold standard for understanding and treating many diseases. It might remind you of the *Upanishadic kosha* model and, indeed, it is a Western ontological model that shares some of the same characteristics.

When human beings are perceived as multilayered and intrinsic to their environments, the viewpoint of the causes of disease begins to shift, as do the approaches to disease treatment and prevention. Health is seen not as a purely biological or personal phenomenon; it is the result of an intricate web of interrelated factors, behaviors, patterns, and interactions. For yoga therapists, it may seem obvious that the benefits of yoga permeate all layers of this model, and research has demonstrated that yoga has numerous structural, physiological, mental health, and social benefits. What may be less obvious to yoga therapists, however, is that these benefits can be scaled to population health through, for example, integrated care strategies that merge mental health and primary care services. If the well-known benefits of yoga—such as improved parasympathetic nervous system function and psychoemotional benefits—are scaled to the community level, we will start to see shifts in population health outcomes. Tremendous

potential benefits to society could be realized by approaching yoga therapy through a population health lens.

#### *Health Professional Education*

Understanding health through the biopsychosocialspiritual model opens the possibility of a broader agenda for health professional education. How do healthcare professionals need to be educated in order to better understand and address the complex web of health-related factors? How can CIM providers build bridges in thinking and collaboration across what has become a landscape of highly specialized and disciplinary areas of healthcare?

The National Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education has a role in coordinating and documenting new education models, practice competencies, and initiatives across the United States. It has adopted an interdisciplinary mindset and is open to new ideas and new areas of professional engagement. This center and similar organizations can be nodes for CIM integration, where yoga therapy trainers can become a part of implementing whole health pedagogies.

## **2. Yoga Therapy Can Reduce Costs**

The United States will spend about \$10,000 per person on healthcare in 2015 (\$3.2 trillion in total),<sup>7</sup> yet our outcomes

are low. From a lifestyle medicine or prevention perspective, these costs become almost negligible.

## **The Triple Aim intends to optimize health system performance by serving three goals: improving the health of populations, reducing costs, and improving patient experience of care.**

look more like those of a developing country. Much of the expense can be attributed to (1) high administrative costs (one quarter of all costs); (2) high costs of medications, durable medical equipment, and salaries; and (3) the relatively higher rate of interventions compared to other industrialized countries.

Yoga therapy services, however, can be delivered in ways that are not top heavy in staff or administration, that do not require any expensive equipment, and with minimal interventions that involve props to help with asana practice. When yoga ther-

Yoga-based lifestyle change can reverse heart disease and positively impact other chronic illnesses.<sup>8</sup> Many of these illnesses (as well as chronic pain and addiction challenges) respond well to lifestyle therapy, which is starting to be considered best practice in some areas of medicine.<sup>9</sup> While yoga professionals need to be careful not to oversell yoga's benefits, yoga therapy may enhance care, make other interventions work better, and may shorten recovery times.<sup>10</sup> The authors of the recent MGH Benson-Henry Institute study wrote:

*(continued on page 26)*

"The data suggests that the intervention should be applied to all at-risk populations, since the intervention has minimal risk, minimal cost, and yields substantial benefits for patients with a wide variety

Researchers at the University of Eastern Michigan analyzed why some states have higher costs than others and drew this conclusion:

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of illnesses. The long-term effect of these interventions on healthy populations is unclear, but the data suggests that mind-body interventions should perhaps be instituted as a form of preventative care *similar to vaccinations or driver education*.<sup>11</sup> (emphasis mine)

### Low-Cost Locations

More people utilize mental health services when those services are co-located with primary care providers.<sup>11</sup> This is called "integrated care" and it's a growing trend in the healthcare world. We live in a fast-paced society; it's difficult to find the time to address all aspects of healthcare, but better healthcare can readily be provided when people can access different modalities under one roof. We can translate this idea from mental healthcare to CIMs like yoga therapy. Yoga therapy will be better accessed when it is provided at healthcare settings under the endorsement and supervision of licensed providers. Not only will this integrate the service into existing systems, it will also give yoga therapy the professional stamp of approval to improve participant buy-in.

### Prevention

The Affordable Care Act's emphasis on prevention is another opportunity for reducing costs through yoga therapy. Currently, yoga therapy research tends to focus on yoga for conditions and diseases, but little attention is given to prevention and its public health application, including the integration of health literacy—the capacity to know and make good decisions about health. Prevention is the mother lode of cost saving, but because it's neither sensational nor crisis-oriented, it receives far less attention and support than other areas of healthcare. Yoga therapy (and safe, well-taught yoga in general) has tremendous potential as a widespread prevention strategy.

"The most effective cost containment measures may be those that increase education and promote healthy lifestyles. Not only do these actions lead to reductions in health care spending, they also improve the health status of the population, and may help to achieve other important social policy goals."<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Yoga Therapy Improves Patient Experience of Care

Healthcare institutions realize that the financial bottom line improves when patients have a better experience of care. When the whole person (as opposed to the disease only) is treated, the experience of care improves. Healthcare is transitioning from volume to value. CIM is an obvious next step in providing high-quality, cost effective, whole-person value in healthcare. Yoga therapy could be a simple and effective way for healthcare institutions to offer better value-based care.

Yoga is person-centered rather than disease-centered. It is empowering and helps patients take an active role in their own healthcare rather than being passive recipients of treatment. Much of the task of managing chronic diseases is in the hands of patients themselves. Healthcare professionals are exploring new ways to improve patient self-management.<sup>13</sup> One of the guidelines for improving patient self-management is to offer support in groups. Yoga therapy is easily adaptable to support groups, can improve the effectiveness of those groups, and can provide a forum to help people learn valuable tools to manage and improve chronic conditions.

### Other Trends

Because health systems currently tend to be uncoordinated, focused on individual

health, and look to maximize profit and volume, healthcare has a long way to go before realizing the goals of The Triple Aim. A newer development in the healthcare world is value-oriented Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) and medical homes.<sup>14</sup> These organizations are likely to be the frontrunners of the Triple Aim and potentially an excellent vehicle for the integration of yoga therapy.

ACOs are groups of providers and suppliers such as hospitals, rehab facilities, and various specialist service providers that seek to coordinate population health and reduce costs across geographic regions. They also include medical homes—typically patient-centered (or primary care) medical homes (PCMHs). ACOs meet individual needs by acting as a coordinating point for care. All of the organizations in the ACO are rewarded by Medicare/Medicaid or insurance companies for lowering costs, increasing performance, and improving health outcomes, and they are all penalized if they don't. An example of value-based care, ACOs receive incentives for working together to collectively find the most efficient and effective evidence-based strategies. If yoga professionals understand and promote yoga therapy as a powerful strategy for meeting the goals of the Triple Aim, they can potentially carve strong inroads into ACOs and PCMHs and help these organizations to meet their goals of providing value-based care.

### First Steps

A comprehensive, top-down, strategic decision to integrate yoga therapy into healthcare would be the strongest indicator of a paradigm shift, away from the crisis-management silo of service delivery and toward the ideals of what wellness-based healthcare can truly provide—healing, reclaiming, thriving, and sustainability. Grassroots efforts to integrate yoga in communities will be the small steps that support this shift.

Research supporting the effectiveness of yoga continues to grow, but more research is needed on cost-effectiveness and how yoga can be integrated in communities. Yoga is unique in providing interventions across the four domains of public health—treatment, recovery, prevention, and health promotion. The time for yoga to become a part of the healthcare system is here. The yoga therapy community should partner with healthcare leaders to initiate both top-down policy-level advocacy and initiatives and bottom-up local-level integrative models. Yoga professionals

(continued on page 46)

can facilitate this shift by becoming more engaged in a broader range of health and research institutions and by conducting their own small-scale research, as well as by training the healthcare workforce in the value of including yoga therapy in an integrated healthcare system.

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