

Calls for regulation as more get hurt on exercise mats

Rise in yoga injuries puts spotlight on instructors

Dan Kadison

Last March a Hong Kong woman was attending a yoga class when her instructor placed his hands on her hips and tried to adjust her position.

He twisted her hips to the right. There was a loud crack. Pins and needles shot through her right leg. She went dizzy.

"I didn't see him coming, and I didn't invite him to come and touch me," the woman said. "And they call it an adjustment."

The woman, a journalist who wants to remain anonymous, says the instructor told her the pain was normal and would go away. But it didn't. The pain got worse.

She has spent thousands of dollars on medical bills to correct muscle pain and pelvic problems, injuries that may one day require surgery. She wants the yoga studio to pay for her medical bills—but all she has received so far is the runaround.

"There's nobody that I can go to and say, 'Are the people who are teaching [there] properly certified according to Hong Kong government standards?' There's no one I can go to and say, 'I was injured by a ... yoga instructor and they're refusing to meet my bills although it's a genuine and reasonable claim', the journalist said.

"What standards can you hold them to for me as a taxpayer and resident? Nothing."

The studio "purports to sell well-being and health, and yet it's all done without any level of responsibility, and I have absolutely no legal recourse without it costing me more money, and more time and more risk that I won't get my money back", she said.

She is not the only person in Hong Kong who has been hurt while practising yoga. And she's not alone in wondering why a local governmental agency or a professional body is not overseeing the activity and the instructors who teach it.

A number of physiotherapists and chiropractors contacted by the *Sunday Morning Post* revealed that dozens of Hongkongers have been hurt while practising yoga this year.

Yoga has caused new injuries, exacerbated old ones or triggered conditions patients did not even know they had, these experts say.

Physiotherapist Tim McCosker has seen about 15 to 20 new yoga-related injuries since January.

"For something that's supposed to be therapeutic or good for you, I think that's a bit much," he said.

His patients' injuries mainly include spinal injuries, and pulled and strained muscles.

"If you pay a fee to consult a professional, you expect that professional to take care of you. The onus is on them to not injure you. There should be some sort of registration or professional qualification before you go and teach it," he said.

Kary Lam, a Central chiropractor, says 10 per cent of new patients seen by her office this year have had yoga-related injuries. That's slightly more than last year, she says. It's a lot, "especially when you think of yoga as something that's good for you".

Dr Lam thinks the government, before considering regulation, should ask the city's yoga industry to create a self-regulating association so the public can file complaints, find out more about instructors and stay informed about the activity.



Yogi Sangeeta Ahuja teaches her class at the Life Management Yoga Centre in Kowloon, one of a growing number of yoga schools in the city. Photo: May Tse

Easy does it - experts warn against trying to go from zero to hero in just a few weeks

It's no stretch. Medical practitioners are reminding Hongkongers about basic exercise principles after dozens of residents have injured themselves practising yoga since the beginning of the year.

"If you're not prepared for it, or you don't do it properly, you can cause injury for sure," said Tim McCosker, a registered physiotherapist in Hong Kong.

A person can't "go from zero to hero in the space of a week or two", he said. "You have to do it gradually just like any other training programme."

Also, "people should ask for other people's qualifications. If they're paying

money and they're going into a gym ... then they should ask, 'What training have you had to teach me this stuff?'"

Added Priscilla Poon, vice-president of operations for the Hong Kong Physiotherapy Association: "We think that yoga is still a type of activity which can improve your strength and also improve your physique."

Nevertheless, she urged those interested in yoga "to have a good instructor and know your body quite well. You have to do yoga based on the principles of stretching exercises - that means you have to do it slowly, and with sustained movement, no jerky

movements should be allowed. And you have to do it based on your own ability or capabilities".

Chiropractor Claudia Ng, said people should tell their doctor before they begin yoga classes, "and have a good understanding and proper analysis of their structure and body mechanics. And see whether yoga is really the exercise of choice".

If given the green light, a patient should ask their doctor for stretching advice, and then begin stretching for a month before joining a class.

Dr Ng also suggested that people might want to think again about

shedding their shoes while practicing yoga poses on a thin mat.

"Just about 80 per cent I see have flat feet or ... in-rolling of the ankles. That alone is enough reason for not doing any [standing] exercises in bare feet ... Over a period time, they could get hurt."

Dr Ng said she encourages many of her patients to do yoga.

"Yoga is a great form of exercise because it incorporates stretching, strengthening, endurance, balance, and co-ordination," she said.

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Ramesh Ahuja, who runs Life Management Yoga Centre in Kowloon with his wife, Sangeeta, believes there should be some form of government monitoring to protect students.

Mr Ahuja estimates there are hundreds of teachers and more than 100 studios and clubs.

"Injuries should almost never happen," he said. "Instructors should assess people's ability before conducting difficult *asanas* [poses]," added Mr Ahuja, who has even heard of yoga centres having students perform headstands on the first day of class, a danger since beginners can lack focus or flexibility.

Claudia Ng, a chiropractor in Central, says her patients are yoga newcomers. "It's about once a month that I see a new case. Usually it's typical sprain, strain injuries."

Dr Ng, however, sees yoga as a



Chiropractors Claudia Ng (left) and Kary Lam have seen many patients with yoga-related injuries in recent months. Photos: Jonathan Wong

sport, comparable to dancing or swimming - pursuits that are not overseen by the government.

"I don't have any agenda. But I'm not sure regulation would stop or reduce these injuries. You do sports; you get injured," Dr Ng said. "If you look at rugby - loads of injuries; soccer - loads of injuries. I don't think that the government will regulate

them. It doesn't make a lot of sense."

An information officer for the Leisure and Cultural Services Department said it did not "have the authority to recognise or formalise different streams of yoga".

Asked about yoga injuries, the Department of Health said a working group on injuries and alcohol misuse had been set up this year to tackle

alcohol and injury related problems.

"The working group will review statistics and local data to identify specific needs and make recommendations accordingly."

The regulation debate in Hong Kong is less heated than in the US, where some states have told yoga schools they must have a licence if they want to teach instructors, according to a *New York Times* report.

Priscilla Poon, vice-president of operations for the Hong Kong Physiotherapy Association, said it was too early to say whether there should be government intervention here.

Ms Poon talked to 10 Hospital Authority physiotherapists, and found that only 10 patients in total had visited them since January.

Even so, Ms Poon said "we have to keep a close eye on it [yoga] because it's getting more popular".

Five times a week - competitive Hongkongers overdoing it

Giovanna Guerrero, 62, a part-time English and Italian teacher has been practising yoga for six years.

In 2003, she underwent operations for breast cancer, then she developed a leg problem. She couldn't balance and wanted to regain her strength, so she took up yoga at a gym in Sai Kung and then at Life Management Yoga Centre in Kowloon.

"I got my balance back the first year, and I was able to do any kind of exercise, and my mind strengthened as well as my body."

With the activity, "you're able to face problems from different perspectives, you're able to see things with detachment," Ms Guerrero

said. "I've really learned a lot. I'm really grateful. I'm healthy, which is the main thing. I'm happy. The only thing that reminds me of my cancer is my wounds."

Ramesh Ahuja, founder of the Life Management centre, says yoga, with its physical, psychological and spiritual components, is not only important for the individual, but for the community, too.

"Yoga can prevent anxiety, depression, crime rate, suicides and make people relaxed and therefore they become more productive which benefits the society at large," he said.

Damien Mouellic teaches anatomy to yoga instructors at Pure Yoga. He

also practices there. He says there is no need for government oversight. The yoga instruction he has seen "is quite good". The instructors "are quite safe in what they do. They don't push people too much".

"Of course, in every single yoga studio, you might have someone that tends to push a little bit more [in advanced classes]. But people tend to push themselves, too, on their own," Dr Mouellic said.

The osteopath, who works for Lauren Bramley & Partners, a medical clinic in Central, says he has seen a few more minor yoga-related injuries compared with last year.

But "yoga has become more and

more popular in the last two years [in Hong Kong]. The number of people doing yoga has probably multiplied by 10, which makes absolute sense that the number of injuries is going to multiply also".

The city's "competitive nature" is also a factor when talking about the number of injury cases, he says. "When they [Hongkongers] do yoga, they do it five times a week. Sometimes they do a bit too much."

Still, the benefits of yoga - from stress relief to disease prevention - "totally outweigh any muscular strain", he says.

In terms of safety, mYoga, a club with branches in Causeway Bay and

Mongkok, says its classes are divided into three levels, members are screened to determine their health and ability before participating, and all instructors are internationally certified.

A club e-mail said: "We also hold regular instructor workshops and ongoing training to continuously improve our instructors' skills, and have visiting yoga trainers from overseas to conduct these workshops for us."

"The approach is always from a safety point of view, emphasising good alignment coupled with the extensive use of yoga props to prevent injuries while achieving fitness goals."

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