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DAILY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR 65p

A TEACHER at my old school began every lesson by barking: 'Sit up straight girls and pay attention.' If I had done either, I might have passed my maths O-Level and I definitely wouldn't be a world-class slouch.

I slouch when I work, when I watch TV, when I eat, and even when I walk. Sometimes I see a reflection in a shop window of a hunched old dear shuffling along and realise it's me.

Having the posture of someone who looks like she lives in a bell tower isn't just lazy, it's also horribly ageing and exacerbates a middle-aged paunch.

It may seem no big deal in the grand scheme of getting older, but bad posture leads to aches and pains and so much more. A flexible and aligned spine means optimal organ health, improved circulation, digestion and mobility. Nine out of ten adults can expect to experience some sort of discomfort as a result of bad posture.

In his book *Stand Taller, Live Longer*, posture expert Dr Steven Weiniger says correct posture can make us feel ten years younger.

I've suffered from chronic back pain and, at 50, I seem to be adding to my list of niggles on a daily basis. A stiff neck one morning, a throbbing knee the next — every day brings with it a new, unwelcome, surprise.

The good news is it's never too late to straighten yourself out and, thanks to a new posture clinic in Italy, overlooking Lake Garda, you can combine a holiday with doing just that. Its dedicated posture programme was the first of its kind.

I reach Lefay Spa via a steep road. It's built into the side of a mountain and it looks more like I'm approaching the lair of a Bond villain than a luxurious spa.

Staff member Anke Hahnse talks me through the spa's ethos, and I immediately observe her ballerina-like poise. She sits opposite me, her back as straight as a board, her stomach perfectly flat, as I gaze at my own sorry state of a belly.

'Our posture programme is one of our most popular,' Anke says. 'People are spending hours staring at computer screens or bent over smartphones. Our posture has suffered and people are experiencing more stress, more tension and more pains in their body.'

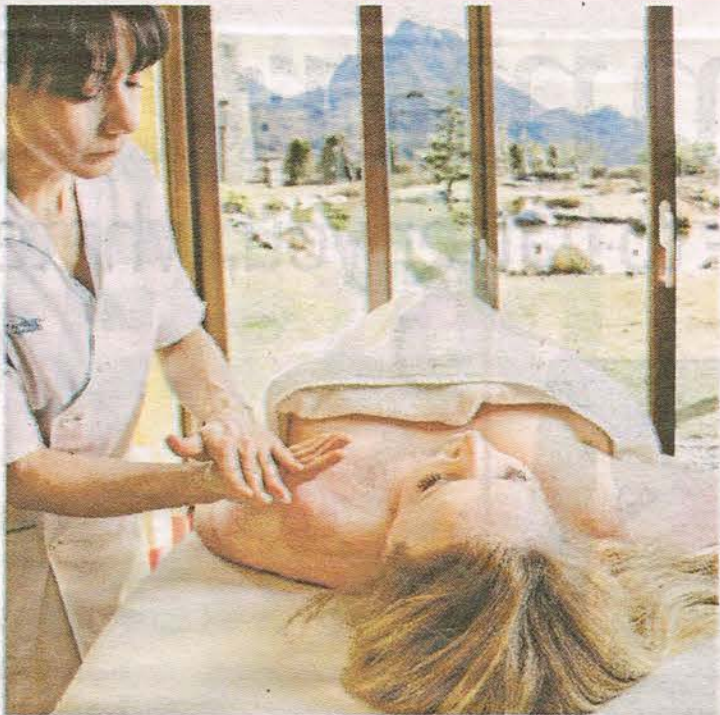
A 2015 study published in *The Lancet* found that musculoskeletal disorders — mostly neck and back pain — are the biggest cause of sick leave in the UK.

While the modern, Western way is to pop a painkiller, at Lefay they treat the mind and body as a whole. Its programme features Chinese therapies, exercise, hydrotherapy, and phytotherapy (the use of plant and plant extracts) in the form of prescriptive teas.

Every stay at Lefay starts with a consultation with one of the doctors, who will then recommend a bespoke programme according to his examination.

Dr Jader Tolja is passionate about the mechanisms of the human body, and how nearly everything we do compromises it — from the chairs ('one of man's worst inventions') that we sit in for hours, to the shoes that stop our feet having contact with the ground and so throw off our balance.

His speciality is the relationship between the mind, body



Heavenly: Claudia in the Lefay Spa's saltwater lake (main picture) and having a massage in the posture programme

by Claudia Connell

and movement, and he has written three books on the subject.

My consultation with him is based on a questionnaire, used to build a picture of my health and then to diagnose. I'm asked about everything from sleep, energy and appetite to bowel movements and flavour preferences. My answers can be linked to potential deficiencies.

As I lie on the examination table, ready for him to check my alignment, he observes how inflexible my ankles are. 'Your left leg is shorter than your right, and that is having a knock-on effect throughout your body,' he says.

It may also be why people ask why I'm limping when I'm not aware I am. It also explains the knee pain, and my tendency to lean to the right when standing or sitting.

When it comes to putting one foot in front of the other, Dr Tolja says that I walk from the tops of my thighs when I should be imagining my legs start at my waist, which will automatically make me walk taller and help work my woefully mushy core muscles.

The conclusion seems to be that I'm a bit of a crooked mess from head to toe.

Thankfully, it's correctable and a course of osteopathy (manipulation and massage of the spine) and cranial sacral therapy (a gentle manipulation of the head, neck and shoulders) should get

me on the straight and narrow. Dr Tolja prescribes a tea that he wants me to drink three times a day.

Its blend includes turmeric, mandarin and liquorice to strengthen my spleen and stomach, harmonise my energy flow, and protect my liver.

The link between weird tea and good posture may seem tenuous but, in Chinese medicine, the belief is that the inner and outer body must be nourished.

MY JOURNEY to better posture starts with a 20-minute floating session in the spa's indoor saltwater lake, which lies in a hot, darkened room with a huge fake moon suspended overhead. It feels like taking a heavenly, decadent midnight dip.

But that floaty feeling doesn't last long as my next treatment is reflexology.

I must put my cards on the table here and say I've always considered reflexology to be hokum. The belief is that an area on our feet corresponds with an internal organ or bodily function, and by applying pressure to the feet, those parts can be healed or improved.

Maurizio, my therapist, says I have water retention and that I need to exercise and sweat more to release the toxins.

He then manipulates my soles. Suddenly, he presses an area on my left foot and it makes me scream. 'That's your back,' he tells me. Thirty seconds later and I'm shrieking again. 'Your neck and shoulders,' he says.

He encourages me to shout, scream and cry whenever I feel the need during the treatment in order to release my emotions.

As my 50-minute session ends, I dread putting my weight on my feet in case it cripples me, but

51
per cent of
over 40s
suffer
regular
back and
neck pain

Five easy at-home



OVERHEAD STRAP STRETCH

REMAIN standing. Raise a strap, tie or belt overhead with your hands wide. Bend your arms until they form a 90-degree angle and draw your elbows back. Hold for 20 seconds.



WAITER'S BOW

WITH feet hip width, place your right hand on your lower back, palm facing out. Place your left palm on your abdomen. Keeping your lower back curve intact, tip forwards for 20 seconds.

From *The Stretching Bible: The Ultimate Guide*

Want to look younger AND taller? Check in to the posture spa



Pictures: KI PRICE Hair and make-up: VIRNA ABIS

Maurizio assures me that not only will I feel no pain, but I will also sleep like a baby that night. He's right on both counts.

I don't know if it's the mountain air or the reflexology, but I awake on day two feeling five years younger and with my skin looking dewy and glowing.

My day starts with a session with a personal trainer. In my experience, these are always half my age and totally unrealistic about what a 50-year-old woman with a bad back and a monster muffin top can achieve.

I'm relieved when Veronica suggests we start with some gentle neck and shoulder exercises. In fact, the first 20 minutes of our hour-long class is spent with me sitting in a chair. That's my kind of workout.

Quickly, it's apparent how stiff my neck is. While Veronica can turn hers to look right over both

shoulders, mine stops several inches short. We perform the easiest set of exercises where I hold my own head and try to push against my hands. Two minutes later and I miraculously turn my neck a further 4in.

Up until now, I had been questioning what some of my programme has to do with posture, but suddenly the penny drops. A stiff neck leads to a tense back and shoulders, which then leads to poor posture.

The five-day programme is busy, but it's not frantic. The bespoke plans allow for downtime between appointments, with opportunities to wander the extensive grounds or gaze at the beautiful scenery.

When I first hurt my back three years ago, I went for physiotherapy, and found it agonising, unhelpful and it left me banging on my doctor's door for an even

higher dose of painkillers. So when I see I'm booked in for two sessions with physio Ferdinando, I feel anxious.

But instead of being pummelled like a lump of dough, he uses the lightest of touches to send energy flowing to my digestive system.

HIS BELIEF is that I hold my emotions in my centre, and this means my back constantly tenses to 'catch' the wobbles I feel there.

In other words: I feel anxious, my stomach starts to flip, and my back and shoulder muscles soak up the tension to steady me.

On my final day, I meet again with Veronica, my bendy personal trainer, who is going to

stretch my meridians. I have visions of a medieval rack, but it's merely a series of exercises to relax the muscles and restore the flow of 'Qi' (energy) through my body.

Before heading home, I undergo two of the stranger treatments. The first is a 'Tui Na' energy balancing massage, a central part of classical Chinese medicine. It aims to improve mental equilibrium, blood circulation and improve joint mobility. It's certainly not a procedure for the shy and retiring. There's no hiding behind a towel here.

My final therapy is Moxibustion, which means 'burning herb'. It's a Chinese technique where heated carbon sticks are applied to the traditional acupuncture points. Dr Tolja wants the therapist to concentrate on my back, shoulders and neck.

I am surprised that being prodded with a burning stick feels rather nice. The heat lasts seconds, and I can feel a warm jet of energy up and down my spine.

As I complete my programme with the doctor, who gives me my homework (improved diet, exercises, mindful walking), I realise how important posture is, and why it's so much more than pulling your shoulders back.

I set off for the airport feeling less stooped, more confident and determined to build on the good work done at Lefay.

■ *THE Lefay Resort costs £253 per night in a prestige junior suite, including breakfast and entrance to the spa. The Postural Programme, including accommodation, is £2,129pp including meals and treatments for five nights. See lefayresorts.com*

stretches to make you walk tall



Snake

LIE on your front with your hands interlocked behind your back (or arms straight by your sides). Draw your shoulder blades closer and lift your upper body and legs a little off the floor. Look down and hold for 20 seconds.



Lying Strap Stretch

LIE on your back and loop a strap, belt or tie around the sole of your right foot. Bend your left leg and place the foot on the floor. Straighten your right leg as much as you can. Repeat on the other side. Hold for 30 seconds.



Kneeling Back Stretch

START on all fours. Sit back on your heels. Straighten your arms and reach your hands out in front of you. Spread your fingers and press down. Draw your hips in the opposite direction to stretch shoulders and back. Hold for 20 seconds.