

SHE FEELS YOUR PAIN
AS A 'MEDICAL INTUITIVE,' RHONDA LENAIR READS
CLIENTS' AILMENTS -- EVEN BY PHONE

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NEWBURY -- Laura Eldridge would like a consultation. Rhonda Lenair is there to help.

During the course of their conversation, Lenair tells the 35-year-old woman, among other things: "You have a genetic predisposition to cataracts. The color of your skin has changed a bit. . . . You have gone through a weight shift, and that was a terribly stressful time for you. . . . Cancer, colon cancer, is in your family. . . . Pregnancy will be difficult for you. . . . You're prone to adhesions and congestion in your left breast. . . . Also, your upper left molar -- there's a funny current up there. The root system of two other teeth looks a little bit off. You're prone to a little ringing in your right ear. By the way, your lower back can get a little achy."

How much of this diagnosis is accurate? Here's Eldridge's response: Her grandparents both had cataracts. She recently lost 12 pounds, mainly because of stress. She suffers from eczema, which runs in the family. Her mother died of colon cancer at age 51. She has no children, having had two pregnancy mishaps. Yearly breast checkups have revealed that her left breast is lumpier than her right. She regularly suffers from toothaches and inflamed gums. Yes, there is a regular ringing in her right ear. And her lower back does ache a lot.

"I mean," says Eldridge, "most people's lower backs probably do ache. But there's no way she could have known about my mother's colon cancer." The strange thing is, Rhonda Lenair is not a doctor examining Laura Eldridge in a clinic.

The two are talking on the telephone, Lenair from her office in Newbury, Eldridge from her home in California. Lenair calls herself a medical intuitive, someone who can "read" your body and tell you what's ailing you -- so she says -- from a toothache to cancer. While she's at it, she'll also tell you what foods to eat or avoid, what vitamins and herbs are good or bad for you, when precisely to see a doctor, and what kind of exercise you should or should not do.

Lenair, a soft-spoken woman of 43, calls it "a bioelectrical analysis" of the body. By speaking to a person, she says she taps into his or her energy field. She likens her skill to an ultrasound machine: She says she can mentally scan a person's body.

"It's not a gift," she says. "It's replicable. I'm just a sensitive person." The bioelectrical field, she says, is the internal field that gives off the vital signs. She is there to decode those signs. "You could think of it as water. If there are any ripples or waves, the water isn't still."

Lenair says she can literally feel your pain. If she's diagnosing your toothache, she'll feel a twinge in her own tooth, she says. Increasingly, people are buying into alternative medicine; doctors and dentists will refer patients -- some even come themselves -- to Lenair. She consults with as many as 10 people a day. For telephone consultations, she charges an initial \$275; follow-ups are \$150.

But the bulk of her work is with addictions -- to alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and eating. Fees range from \$245 for treatment to stop smoking to \$1,200 for eating disorders and depend on the duration of treatment.

A woman battling addiction to alcohol flew in from Hawaii. A mother from Florida brought her alcoholic son. An Alabama woman came to shake off a morphine addiction. In the waiting room of Lenair's bucolic home office, scrapbooks bulge with cards from grateful clients. Though she won't say what conditions her clients had, the scrapbook includes Norman Lear and Martin Sheen.

Lenair and her partner, Barry Chalfin, were flown to Jordan in 1994 to work with the family of King Hussein. They left with a bag full of gifts, including two silver plates bearing the royal gold crown and a necklace inscribed with an Arabic prayer on the back from the king's sister, Princess Basma.

Medical intuition is not a new field. The most famous practitioner was the legendary Edgar Cayce, who, in the earlier part of this century, reportedly diagnosed more than 11,000 medical conditions. Like Cayce, Lenair has no college training. She studied for the ballet and describes her childhood as quiet and sheltered.

At age 16, while in London to audition for the London Festival Ballet company, she became ill. Doctors discovered a "suspicious mass" in her lower abdomen and suggested surgery, she says. She declined and was discharged. As she tells it, she was leaving the hospital when a doctor stopped her and told her she had a strong electromagnetic field. She became his protégé and studied under him. Years later, after some independent study, she began her treatment of addictions. (When she returned to the United States, the mass dissipated over three months until there was no trace of it.)

But at the moment, there's not a lot of time to chat. Sophia from Washington is on the line, and Lenair is leaning back in her chair, eyes closed, in a trancelike state. Her words come forth in a stream.

"Your stomach is a bit off, bloated and tender. I'd like to see you use a lemon and a half daily on your food or in your beverages. . . . You have an irregular heartbeat going back to when you were 12. Did something happen then? In November, there may be more heart trouble. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. . . . By the way, are you getting normal periods?" As she speaks, she gestures with her free hand. Her eyes open, she scribbles notes about the client: She should avoid green peppers and nightshade vegetables, and increase her intake of vitamin E and walnut oil.

When she is finished speaking, Sophia Orr from Bothell, Wash., confirms a trauma at age 12. "My mother was a hippie, basically, and when I was 12, I left her and went to live with my dad," she says. "I had panic attacks and heart problems. I've been on heart medication."

Disillusioned with medical doctors, she turned to Lenair, whose name she found on a Web site that listed medical intuitives. "Doctors will tell you you're fine, it's all in your head," Orr says. Lenair, she adds, "is expensive, but compared to the doctor, it's cheap."

Leigh Cotter would agree. For years, she says, her life was a haze of booze and hangovers. "I'd drink a liter of wine a night," says the 34-year-old saleswoman from Lancaster. "I couldn't even go from work to home without stopping at the liquor store. I tried AA three times. I tried Smart Recovery. I tried cutting down on my own. Nothing worked. It was completely disrupting my life." A year ago, a friend dragged her to Lenair after a night of hard drinking.

"I was laughing when she told me about her," says Cotter. "I said, 'Yeah, right. This is just another crazy gimmick.' But I was in a panic, so I tried it." She says she hasn't touched alcohol since.

Siobhan Cunningham of San Francisco, who is visiting her cousin in Lexington, dropped by recently for a second visit. A self-described sugar addict who used to pig out on pastries, ice cream, and cookies, she says she hasn't touched sweets -- even fruit -- since seeing Lenair. The first week, she lost 7 pounds. Now "I have no desire for sweets at all," she says. "In fact, I have a real aversion to them."

Michael Johnson is a psychiatrist at Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates in Peabody and Cambridge. He heard about Lenair and called her "on a whim." He then went in to see her.

"Sitting in front of her is like being in front of an X-ray machine," he says. "It was almost embarrassing." He won't reveal what she told him, but he credits her with an

80 percent accuracy rate and has referred patients to her.

How does he explain what she does? "I don't," he says. He adds: "I believe there are some people who can somehow know stuff which is not of their own."

Johnson acknowledges the many critics of such alternatives. "Nonetheless, people are voting with their feet because something is helpful with these new paradigms," he says.

Another psychiatrist at Harvard Vanguard, Steven Adelman, is more skeptical. The medical director of substance abuse services, Adelman says such healing is more psychological than physical and has a higher recidivism rate.

"Belief is a very powerful thing," he says, "and charismatic healers inspire belief." If you took hundreds of addicted people and sent them to such healers, the percentage of those kicking their habits would be modest "because you'd have a lot of nonbelievers in there."

Adelman adds: "I'm not knocking it, because I do think it helps some people."

Lance, a sheepish-looking 12-year-old boy sitting in front of Lenair, has been brought in by his father, a financial adviser, because of an eating disorder. The boy won't eat -- except, of course, junk food. The father has tired of doctors telling him that it's "normal."

Lenair explains that her therapy is "psychophysiologically based." The kid gives her a blank look. She speaks to him for a while longer. During the treatment, which involves pressure from Lenair's hands applied to his forehead, the father is asked to leave the room.

A little later, Lenair beckons him to return. "I show a trauma when he was 9 years old," says Lenair.

The father reveals -- and the son swears he didn't tell -- that his divorce occurred then, which shattered the boy. Lenair suggests a list of foods and activities, including hummus and aikido.

The boy says he has "no clue" what hummus is. And aikido? "I don't know what the heck that is, either." (For the record, hummus is a Middle Eastern dish based on chickpeas and sesame paste; aikido is a Japanese martial art.)

Two weeks later, Lance has made a little progress. "He ate a beet last night, which is an improvement for him," his father says. But then there's that \$5 worth of candy he bought.

Thus far, the father has shelled out \$1,200 for treatment. "I think," he says, "that both Rhonda and my son have more work to do."

SIDEBAR **Skepticism vs. testimony**

The Learning Channel did a program last winter called "Strange Science," which included segments on the Shroud of Turin, levitation, and Rhonda Lenair, among other topics. Although a New York surgeon spoke glowingly of how Lenair helped him quit smoking, Michael Shermer, the editor of Skeptic magazine, whom Lenair "read" over the telephone, said the session was "completely worthless."

"I can't imagine," said Shermer, "anyone paying money for this." We decided to see how Lenair fared on a blind reading for a Globe editor. The only thing Lenair was told was the editor's first name and date of birth. During their 40-minute conversation, Lenair touched on several topics, from the editor's basal temperature to her nerves. Lenair's score card: a 75-80 percent accuracy rate. Some highlights follow:

- Lower back off; left shoulder off balance; lumbar needs improvement. (True; editor uses massage therapy for lower back and left shoulder.)
- Lower right molar needs to be looked at. (True; right molar needs crown.)
- Clenches teeth at night. (True.)
- Tenderness in right breast. (Not true.)
- Heart fibrillates at times. (True.)
- Lucid dream patterns. (True.)
- Father has to watch his throat; he gets a funny feeling when he swallows. (True; father has suffered a recent persistent cough.)
- Mother is very exacting; loves to work with her hands and create with her sense of taste. (True; mother is a superb cook.)
- Age 15 was challenging year. (Not true; at least, not any more challenging than for your average 15-year-old.)
- Dog is allergic to chicken. (True; dog gets diarrhea if fed chicken.)