

FIGHTING THE COMPUTER EPIDEMIC

Injuries are reaching epidemic proportions in the modern workplace, warns Ian Wee.

Ian Wee is an occupational therapist on a crusade. When he is not treating computer operators' muscular and joint problems, he's actively campaigning to highlight the importance of preventing such problems.

He is especially critical of workplaces where computers are integral, but ergonomics and their proper application are no more than an after-thought.

"Ergonomics is a serious issue that needs to be addressed when work spaces are being designed, not after people begin suffering debilitating problems as a result of poor posture, usually due to badly designed furniture," he said.

Ian has a special empathy with his patients, as his own spine was damaged during a work-related incident while completing National Service in Singapore 12 years ago.

Ian's wife, who has had her share of computer-exacerbated spine problems as a systems analyst working long hours on a keyboard, also benefits from his expertise with musculoskeletal injuries.

Although Ian does not like to dwell on his own personal spine trauma, he does say it enables him to have real insight into the pain suffered by people experiencing what is called Cumulative Trauma Syndrome or CTS.

While in Singapore, Ian's spine was treated by an occupational therapist trained at Curtin University. Interestingly, Ian says Australian university-trained occupational therapists, including several from Curtin, hold a monopoly in Singapore's professional rehabilitation field.

So positive was his response to the treatment, he decided to settle in Perth and study the discipline at Curtin. After four years full time study, Ian graduated with Honours in Occupational Therapy from the Faculty of Health Science.

He has just completed a pilot study of 23 WA computer industry workers for the Australian Computer Society. The study concluded 100 per cent of the participants were suffering physical problems caused or exacerbated by working on computers.

Ian believes the problem is rife within the industry and in coming months will widen the demographic profile of the study to gain a more accurate picture.

Ian also wants to investigate the negative physical effects that mobile telephones have on our necks and shoulders and hopes to write a research paper next year.

Ian says CTS has three main causes: bad posture caused by poor work stations or ignorance of proper posture, ignorance of how to properly use an ergonomic work station and finally, computer users working for too long without regular breaks.

The best way to overcome all of these problems is through education and what Ian calls maintenance care.

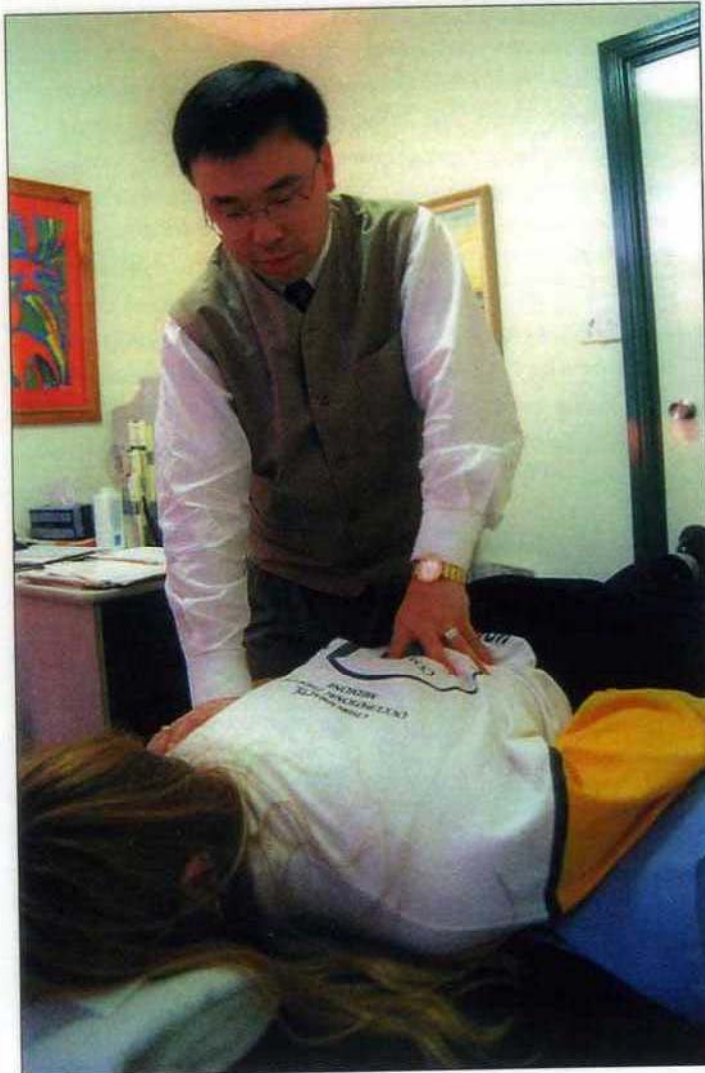
"It may sound strange, but after a problem has been treated and improved, the body needs to be treated every one to three months to nip any new problems in the bud," he said.

"This maintenance care, along with self care and an awareness of how your spine works, can prevent serious problems and save insurance companies a lot of money," said Ian.

Ian is still involved with Curtin as a part time occupational therapy lecturer.

"It's interesting to hear students' contributions because not only does it challenge you, it teaches things you may not already know," he said.

Ian is also Managing Director of a company involved with the mining and petroleum industry sector and has been active in ethnic business and social activities.



Left: Ian at work in his West Perth practice.