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Symposium on Upper Limb Health for Musicians Held at Music School

James Houlik, co-chair of undergraduate studies and chair of woodwinds, organized a unique symposium on upper limb health for musicians, which took place at the Mary Pappert School of Music, Sept. 13–14, 2009.

The rigors of performing music cause 60 percent or more of all musicians to experience upper limb injuries, according to Houlik. That gives musicians something in common with office workers, checkout clerks and the 15 million people who repeat small hand movements that can cause Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI).

A saxophone player for 54 years, Houlik reports no RSI issues himself, but has increasing concerns about the students he is teaching and the practices he advocates. “I’ve written scores of pages of exercises and it occurred to me that maybe I’ve been writing a prescription for injuries.”

To determine if his exercises were medically correct, Houlik enrolled as a special student at Wake Forest University with Dr. Robert Markison, a hand surgeon, and invested time in watching surgeries and discussing RSI.

At September’s symposium, Markison, currently a professor at the University of California San Francisco, addressed comprehensive hand care for musicians by live video feed. Though genetics play a part in susceptibility to RSI, Markison stressed the



Dr. Lea Pearson, a specialist in body mapping and injury prevention explaining how other parts of the body can affect hand functions.

importance of combating the disorder by measures such as wearing fingerless gloves and intentionally over-hydrating with water, juice and herbal tea to keep microcirculation open to the fingertips.

Dr. Lea Pearson, a specialist in body mapping and injury prevention from Columbus, Ohio, gave a presentation titled *Tips of the Iceberg: How Whole Body Use Affects Hand Functions*. Body mapping involves the connectedness of the entire body, and mapping studies suggest that tensions beginning at the shoulder and neck region migrate to the hands.

After Pearson’s presentation, Dr. Gregory Marchetti of the physical therapy program in Duquesne’s

Rangos School of Health Sciences discussed the role of physical therapy in musicians’ health. Marchetti, a licensed physical therapist since 1983, has presented nationally and internationally on topics including playing-related disorders in performance musicians.

Houlik’s long-standing interest in preventing injury in musicians’ upper limbs inspired him to design an improved saxophone keyboard.

“Musicians are small muscle athletes. When you combine that fact with the reality that we are also subject to a great deal of tension, you have a propensity for risk of RSI,” said Houlik. “It interrupts careers, and it’s brutal psychologically.”