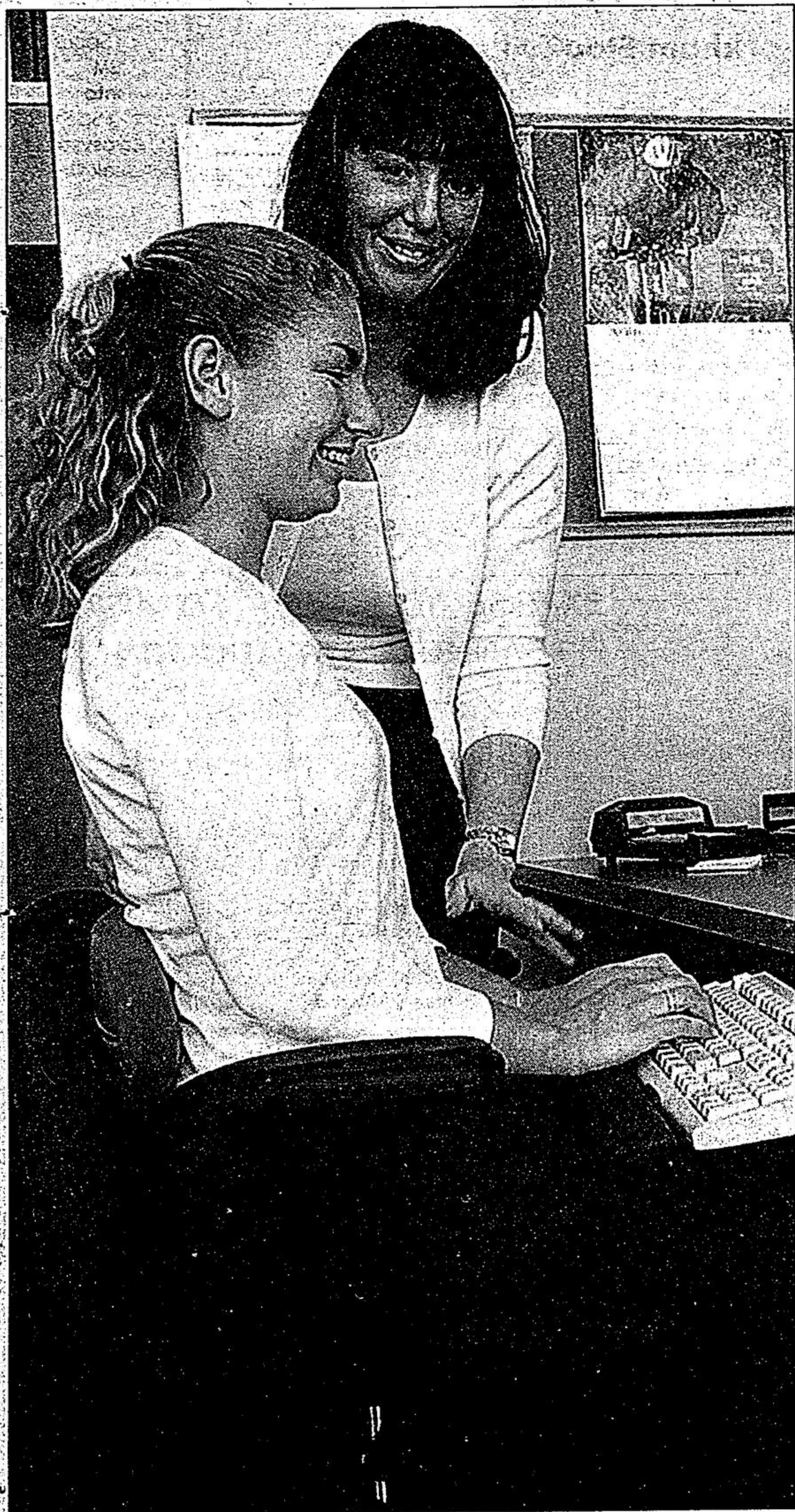


## ETCETERA

Thursday, April 12, 2001

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STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Physiotherapist Sheryl Winkler shows the correct computer posture to student Jackie Botham at Newmarket's York Rehab Associates.

## KEEPING IT STRAIGHT

TEACHING KIDS HOW TO  
POSITION THEMSELVES  
AT THE COMPUTER CAN PREVENT  
INJURIES DOWN THE ROAD

BY STEFANIA RIZZI  
Staff Writer

**T**he day your children have been anxiously awaiting has finally arrived.

You've upgraded your RAM, added a DVD drive and signed up for the latest high-speed Internet connection.

Now the family computer has been updated, you know your children are going to be sitting at the computer for hours on end every day.

But has any thought gone into teaching your child appropriate computer posture?

As children spend more and more hours at computers, sitting in positions that put undue strain on their bodies, North American researchers say they may be prone to muscle and joint-related injuries.

*'Most of the young (patients)  
are treated for back pain or neck pain  
and almost all are posture-related.'*

With American statistics estimating the average child will spend more than two years of his life on e-mail and more than 23 years on the Web, it is important children be taught appropriate computer posture, even before learning what the mouse does or how to print a page.

Teaching children at an early age how to position themselves in front of a computer could prevent injury down the road, said York Rehab Associates physiotherapist Susan Thiessen.

"Most of the young (patients) are treated for back pain or neck pain and almost all are posture-related," said Thiessen, who has been practising more than 20 years.

"If you look at young children, preschoolers, their head sits perfectly on top of their shoulders and they have a curve in their back," the Aurora res-

ident said. "Once they learn to read, get into video games or sit at the computer, all that gets thrown out of whack."

*'We should try to (sit properly) as much as possible because once the wear and tear happens, (the damage) is not reversible, for the most part.'*

"What we usually see (then) is the rounded back, the slump forward and the shoulders (then) have to hold up the neck, which causes a lot of muscle strain and puts strain at the top of the neck," said Thiessen, adding this posture can cause headaches and lead to low back pain.

"We should try to (sit properly) as much as possible because once the wear and tear happens, (the damage) is not reversible, for the most part."

To avoid injury, such as computer-related repetitive strain injury, Thiessen and Newmarket's Southlake Regional Health Centre physiotherapy specialist Betty Trach agreed body posture and equipment should be ergonomically correct.

When working at a computer station, the feet should be placed flat on the ground or on a footrest, with the back fully supported by a chair.

If the chair cannot be adjusted to support the back properly, Thiessen recommends a cushion or rolled towel be placed in the curve of the back.

The monitor should be placed directly in front of you, about 20 to 30 inches away, Trach said.

"You should be able to focus comfortably on the screen without having to lean forward or pull away to focus," the physiotherapist said. "If the terminal on the desk surface is too low, elevate it so it's high enough that you're not crouching down."

When the head or body does not have to twist to see the computer screen, you know you're in a good position, Thiessen added.

"If you're always working on one side ... you get joints and muscles that are tight and you end up unbalanced and then you get pain," she explained. "You should be sitting in a neutral position."

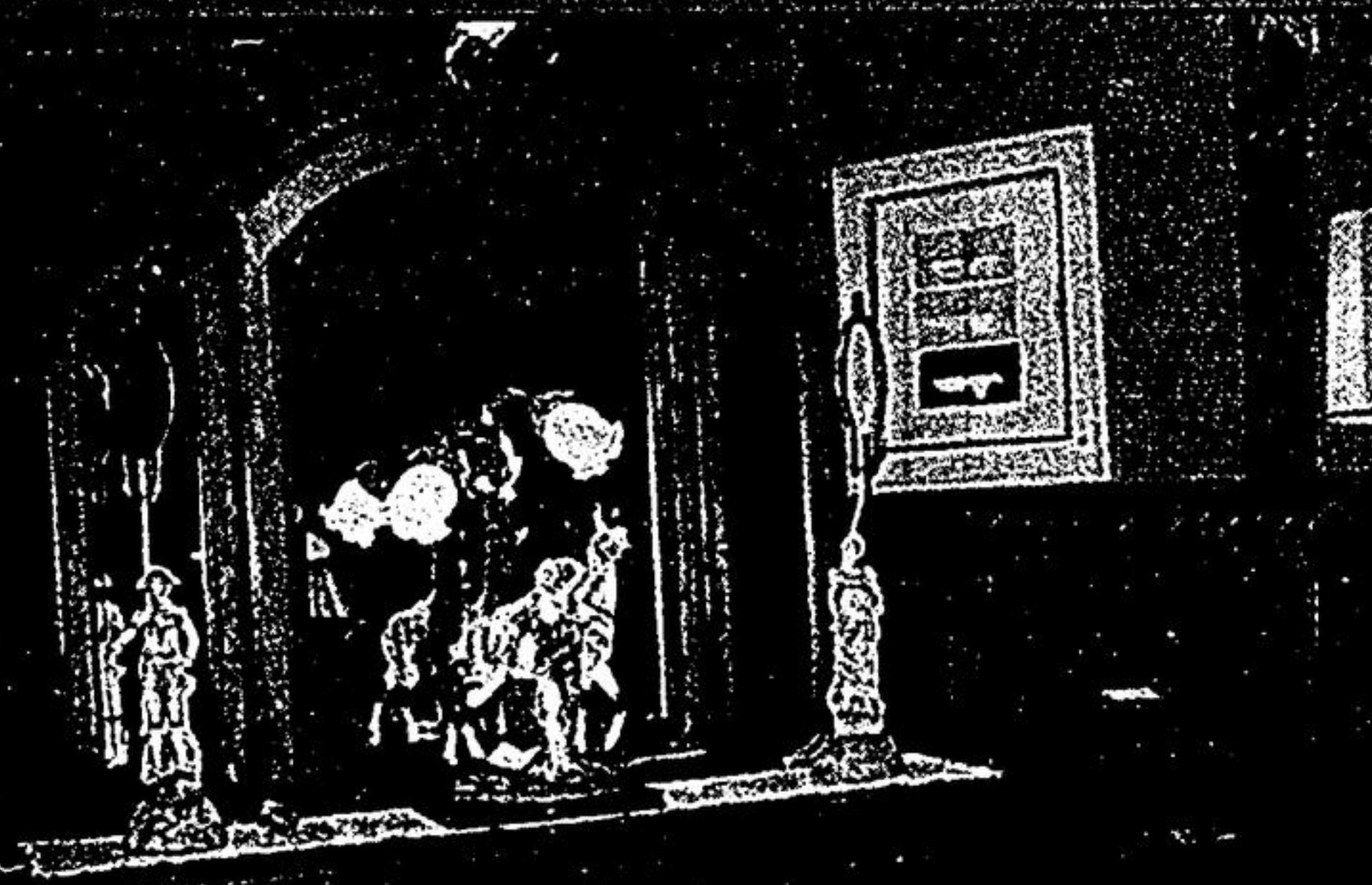
Both experts agree computer users should take frequent breaks to relax muscles, joints and eyes. They should also do stretching exercises.

## POSTURE-PERFECT

Below are several examples of the sitting posture of choice for both children and adults as recommended by physiotherapists:

- spine should be in an upright position with shoulders atop hips;
- lower back should have a slight hollow, with the backrest of the chair supporting the lower back and pelvis;
- head should be balanced and ears aligned with the shoulders;
- upper arms should be in an approximate vertical position, with lower arms at a 90-degree horizontal angle at the elbow, so wrists won't bend to the side when typing;
- feet should be placed flat on the floor or on a footrest;
- legs and hips should be perpendicular to the spine.

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