

The Bowen Technique – an effective complement

By Janie Godfrey

In the range of complementary therapies, The Bowen Technique is the “new kid on the block” in the UK, as it has only been taught here since 1993. In spite of this relatively short time, there are now more than a thousand fully accredited practitioners. A number of these are nurses who find Bowen to be a very effective treatment option. Because it is such a gentle therapy, it can be given to people post-trauma, post-operatively, the very young, the very old or the very ill. District Nurse Ann Offord, from Essex, says: “What nurses are crying out for is a treatment they can use in the context of their typical hectic workloads which is portable, safe, and effective. There is no other therapy I know which fits these needs like Bowen does.”

Bowen work is very subtle and does not involve any equipment or oils. The practitioner, using just fingers and thumbs, makes gentle rolling-type moves over soft tissue, applying very little pressure. The effect of the Bowen move is to create a gentle ‘disturbance’ in the underlying fascia, which in turn prompts a central nervous system response that prompts responses such as repair, realignment, muscle spasm release and, very commonly, a sense of well-being and reduced anxiety. Although most Bowen procedures are performed with patients either prone or supine, a significant number are performed with the patient sitting or standing and of course most all of them can be applied, if need be, when the patient is not in the ideal position due to their condition.

Eilish Lund is a lymphoedema nurse at a Hospice in North Wales. She heard of Bowen from a nurse who used it on patients for pain relief and symptom control. Eilish treated patients with primary lymphoedema and lymphovenous oedema. She found that most patients felt better and moved more freely. Over a period of months a gradual sustained limb volume reduction was noticed. But the result that most amazed her was Bowen’s effect on pain - drastically reducing or eradicating it.

Dr JoAnne Whitaker is a US-based medical doctor with an impressive research CV that spans her long career. She trained in The Bowen Technique over

10 years ago and subsequently established the Bowen Research and Training Institute in Florida, of which she is the President and Director. She has written of the therapy:

“The Bowen Technique affects various bodily systems, as does the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which is responsible for controlling over 90% of what goes on in our bodies from heart rate to motor skills. Over ten years of research has shown that the Bowen therapy balances the autonomic nervous system, and therefore works on a variety of different conditions, i.e.: stress, headaches, TMJ, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue and arthritis. The therapy is applicable in diverse healing professions and is a major advance in alternative healing affecting body, mind and spirit.”¹

A typical case that illustrates the body-mind-spirit scope of Bowen’s effect is that of a woman with chronic back pain, which had been increasing over a 12-year period. She also suffered from deep depression and was often ill. Her back pain was resolved with two Bowen treatments. The frequent periods of illness also stopped straightaway. Some months later she wrote, “the Bowen treatment seems to have had a marked effect on my general health, with practically no illness all winter, and also my mental/emotional health is much better. I don’t have the down days and depression that I suffered with for years”.²

Michelle Marr is a physiotherapist and Bowen practitioner. She works in the sub-acute rehabilitation ward of a hospital where she sees stroke patients after a few weeks of stabilising, when they have the energy for an hour or so per day of rehab. A problem common to these patients is hemiplegic shoulder pain. This, in turn, can slow down their functional recovery and that can subsequently lead to disability, so it is important to

¹ J.A. Whitaker, Breaking Records in Golf by Balancing the Autonomic Nervous System. (2001) *Future of Golf (FOG) Conference, Phoenix, Arizona [Abstract]*.

² Alastair Rattray, The Effect of Bowen on Pain and Anxiety (2002) *unpublished paper*

deal with the shoulder pain as quickly and effectively as possible. Michelle has found that Bowen is particularly useful for patients with a lot of pain, especially the hemiplegic shoulder pain. This is especially good news, as this condition is traditionally difficult to manage with orthodox physio. Michelle has seen good results with Bowen within 1 – 4 treatments. An additional benefit of the Bowen treatment is that it doesn't seem to matter how long the patients may have had the shoulder problem. Whether it has been for days or for months, Bowen works very well. She says that she would now choose the Bowen Technique over everything else for any shoulder problem: tendon injury, realignment problem, tendonitis, rotator cuff injury, tennis elbow, nerve lesions, post-operatively and especially in stroke for hemiplegia. To ensure the maxim effect of the Bowen treatment, good postural alignment of the body needs to be a major consideration in the days following treatment thereby promoting good circulation, lymph drainage and joint articulation.

Lack of proper sleep is a problem for many people, of course, and it can be a particular problem for patients in hospital. Physiotherapist Michelle Marr estimates that within one week of the first Bowen treatment, 80% of neurological patients are regularly sleeping better, and this resolution lasts. This of course means that patients are likely to have more energy during the day and will be able to withstand greater therapy levels, which in turn speeds their recovery. A number of nurses who have trained as Bowen practitioners report that when a patient is wide awake and can't be given more medication, a few Bowen moves will very often ease pain, relax them and help them to sleep naturally. This is especially comforting and effective in the small hours of the night.

The Bowen Technique is named for the man who developed it, Thomas Bowen of Geelong, Australia. He successfully demonstrated the effectiveness of a series of gentle, precise moves on specific muscles, tendons and nerves to relieve all kinds of pain in many acute and chronic conditions. It is a well-known therapy in Australia and New Zealand where it is even offered on their NHS. In the 1950's Tom Bowen's clinic was always full as clients sought him out purely by word of mouth. He practiced until his death in 1982.

Julian Baker, the Director of the European College of Bowen Studies and author of the first book to be published about The Bowen Technique, says:

"The key to Tom Bowen's success was his principle that very little needed to be done in order for the body to start the process of repair. The key element to understand about the Bowen Technique is that it is not the therapist that is doing the repair. The principles of The Bowen Technique start with the understanding and conviction that the body is

capable of repairing itself, given the right time and conditions. Bowen is a treatment that creates a set of parameters whereby the body's own restorative ability is accessed."³

Bowen Technique practitioner and teacher Paula Esson pioneered a private Bowen clinic in her local NHS medical centre in Durham. There had been a desire to offer a therapy addressing many muscular-skeletal dysfunctions such as spondylosis, lumber pain, sciatica, shoulder restriction, sports injuries, muscular fatigue, cervical restriction and skeletal pain in general which did not involve ballistic manipulation or long term therapy to achieve a lasting resolution to the presentation. In this regard, Bowen played a serious role within the GP practice and it proved to be very successful. Patients enjoyed their Bowen treatments and the 80% success rate achieved in pain relief resulted in a measurable reduction in medication and long-term physiotherapy.

There is enormous scope for the use of the Bowen Technique by nurses in any setting. It is gentle, portable, natural, effective and safe. It has been the subject of a number of research studies where it was found to be effective in treatment of frozen shoulder, migraine and adult asthma. The results of recently completed research on the effect of Bowen on hamstring flexibility will be released in the spring of 2005 and will be of great significance in the treatment of lower back pain, sports injuries and sports injury prevention.

About the author: Janie Godfrey is a Bowen Technique practitioner in Frome, Somerset and also works part time at the European College of Bowen Studies with Julian Baker, Director and Principal Instructor.

³ Julian Baker *The Bowen Technique*. (Corpus Publishing. Gloucestershire UK) 2001