

'Er, is that it?'

The Bowen Technique – which seems too gentle to have any effect – can help with problems such as backache and migraine, often when medicine can't

Words **Rachel Carlyle**

It's not often that you hear a complementary therapist admit that most patients get halfway through their first appointment and wonder if they've wasted their money. But that's exactly how many feel during a session of Bowen Technique, a light manipulation of muscles and soft tissue that feels almost pointlessly gentle.

'People say, "Er, is that it?" Or I can see they're thinking, "What an idiot! I am never coming back",' says Julian Baker, who brought the therapy to the UK from Australia in the Nineties. There are now a thousand practitioners in Britain, and it has a diverse fan base, including celebrities such as Elle Macpherson, footballer Dwight Yorke and even the Chancellor's wife Frances Osborne.

Most patients come to Bowen with a musculo-skeletal problem: typically backache, frozen shoulder or sports injuries. A first treatment might be 20-30 minutes: the practitioner will lightly 'roll' their finger or thumb over muscles and the surrounding connective tissues at specific points, many in the back and neck. The pressure is no more than you could apply to the eyeball. After four to six moves, the therapist will leave the room for a few minutes and the client closes their eyes and relaxes. Then the therapist returns for the next moves.

'Those breaks are fundamental: you are starting a dialogue between the brain and the body's systems so the body can heal itself,' says Baker. 'I tell clients, in between not doing much, I am going to do even less, I'm afraid.'

Bowen therapists work on the fascia, the connective tissue that wraps around muscles, which they believe can become twisted and cause pain – often somewhere else as the body compensates for the original injury.

But how can such a small movement make any difference? 'You can say the same for a pin and a balloon,' Baker



Kyle Mlnogue, Frances Osborne and adventurer Bear Grylls all testify to the positive effects of the Bowen Technique

explains. 'The more tension you build in to a structure, the less pressure you need to apply to change it. If I stood in front of someone wearing a shirt and twisted the left-hand corner of it, you would see the material stretching – that's where the tension is, and it would feel uncomfortable. All I need to do to release the tension is unwind that twisting. The body is not a pile of bones stacked on top of bones: it's a series of tensions.'

Baker, Britain's leading authority on the technique and the author of *Bowen Unravelled* (Lotus Publishing, £16.99), admits he isn't sure exactly how it works. Even its Australian inventor, Tom Bowen, wasn't sure. He was a labourer who left school at 14 and was self-taught. By the Sixties he was treating 13,000 patients a year with his

homespun technique, though he never wrote down his methods or explained any philosophy behind them. It was only named after his death in 1982.

But several pieces of research in the past ten years have shown that it does work – although as with most complementary therapies that lack pharmaceutical-industry-style funding, most are small studies and not 'gold standard' trials. In one on patients with frozen shoulder, half were given three sessions of Bowen and the other half 'fake' Bowen. The Bowen patients had a 23-degree improvement in movement, compared with 8 degrees for the fake treatment. Other studies have shown good results for knee and ankle pain (19% reported full recovery; 69% a partial recovery), hamstring injuries, migraine (79.5% reported a positive result) and asthma (83% had fewer attacks and 75% used less medication afterwards). Therapists also report success with infant colic, bedwetting, hay fever and arthritis. If results aren't seen within two or three sessions, clients are advised to stop.

Some GPs now refer patients to Bowen technicians (it costs £35-£45 per session). 'I tend to be sceptical of such things, but after trying everything for my own sciatica, Bowen was the only treatment that worked,' says recently retired Warwickshire GP Dr Claire Pickin, who went on to train in Bowen. 'I began suggesting it to patients with musculo-skeletal pain and those for whom I had nothing else to offer from mainstream medicine. It more often helped than didn't. What I think happens is that it sends the body into a deep state of resting so the muscle tension is spontaneously released.'

'Bowen is simple, gentle and without side effects. So often GPs dismiss older people in pain, saying they have to expect that with age. But Bowen was a great lesson to me – you can help the healing power of the body so people can lead a normal life again.'

More information

The two main Bowen organisations in Britain are the European College of Bowen Studies, where Julian Baker teaches (thebowentechnique.com, 01373 461812) and The Bowen Association (bowen-technique.co.uk). Claire Pickin's practice is in Shipston-on-Stour (shipstontherapycentre.co.uk, 01608 664664)