

IT WORKS FOR ME THE BOWEN TECHNIQUE

Kick the inhaler into touch

A gentle therapy can be a breath of fresh air for asthma sufferers. **Celia Dodd** reports

Simon Thomas won't go anywhere without his inhaler. Simon, 35, an assistant transport manager, has suffered regular asthma attacks all his adult life. Winters have always been the worst: last year he suffered a slight attack nearly every day and, if not nipped in the bud, they became severe several times a week. "I would have to sit down and try to catch my breath and use the inhaler to get the attack under control."

His job means that he can't avoid two key triggers: cold weather and diesel fumes. Fur, feathers, hay fever and any kind of exertion could also set off an attack.

But now, after ten months of Bowen Technique therapy, Simon is thinking seriously about leaving his inhaler at home for the first time in 20 years. After just four weeks of the therapy - which involves gentle manipulation of the soft tissue in specific areas of the body - the attacks decreased dramatically. Last month he used his inhaler just once, when he visited friends with a pet rabbit.

Simon had never heard of the Bowen Technique until he saw an advertisement last January for volunteers to take part in a nationwide study into its effect on asthma. He was pretty sceptical, but he thought it was worth a try.

Besides asthma, Bowen is used to treat muscular-skeletal problems in the back, neck and knees, and a widening variety of problems, from migraines and irritable bowel syndrome to anxiety and even chronic infection.

In Simon's first hour-long session, Janie Godfrey, the Bowen therapist, took note of what triggered his asthma, how it behaved at its worst and how it responded to medication. She then used the standard Bowen procedure, followed by the treatment specifically for asthma. Both consist of a series of "moves", which Godfrey describes as a "tiny, rolling motion over the muscles".

Between each set of moves there are breaks during which the therapist leaves the room for a few minutes while the patient remains relaxing on the bed. Janie explains this unique feature of the technique: "As we understand it, the breaks give the body a chance to respond, to take on board the moves that have been made. It's as if you get into a dialogue with the body."

Simon was impressed: "The treatment was gentle, although some of the moves felt strange at first. You wear loose clothing and lie on the bed, covered in blankets, apart from the area of your body that is being worked on. It's pleasant, and afterwards you feel relaxed."

"What I found really surprising was that during the first few sessions I started to have muscular spasms, in the thighs or in my upper body - not in the area Janie had just worked on. But as the sessions went on the tremors decreased and then stopped entirely." The asthma attacks decreased, too, and his hay fever, which he usually

Trigger happy: the Bowen Technique helps the body to break the trigger that causes an asthma response



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response. If the body is capable of dealing with a condition, Bowen is usually able to trigger its ability to do so. It has a profound effect on stimulating the body's own systems to sort themselves out."

According to Janie, most Bowen patients experience a significant improvement, and often total recovery after about four sessions, although some asthma patients need as many as 12. Most patients come back for top-up treatments, which serve as a reminder to the body.

All asthma patients are told to come back if they have an attack. They are also taught an emergency move, which involves pushing your thumb into the soft stomach area and is illustrated on www.relieve-childhood-asthma.com. Janie wishes everyone knew how to do it, because it can break even quite dangerous attacks.

For Simon the acid test will be the next few months of chilly 3am starts. He says: "If I get through to the new year without an attack I might leave my inhaler behind. But it will be odd to give it up - it's a crutch I had always assumed I would need for the rest of my life."

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE?
DR TOBY MURCOTT

CAN THE BOWEN TECHNIQUE REALLY CURE ASTHMA?

Bowen practitioners do not claim to cure asthma, but do say that it can be very effective in managing the condition. Many patients, particularly children, report that they found relief with the technique.

There are two studies currently under way in Britain that hope to provide a clearer picture of whether it works. The Bowen Technique National Asthma Research Programme is two thirds of the way through its year-long study of 30 patients and 19 therapists.

The other, on childhood asthma, is being run by the Bowen therapist Alastair Rattray, who is hoping to recruit 100 children.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER AILMENTS?

Professor Bernadette Carter, of the University of Central Lancashire, has published a pilot study on the Bowen Technique and frozen shoulder. This is a common, painful complaint that is particularly difficult to treat, and can take years to clear up. Professor Carter found that between three and five Bowen sessions improved the patient's shoulders considerably. In fact, she was so surprised by the results that she repeatedly checked them to make sure she'd got them right. This

WHAT IS IT?

THE BOWEN TECHNIQUE

is a soft-tissue manipulation therapy that is applied to the muscles, tendons and ligaments of the body very gently and with minimum pressure. No one - perhaps not even Tom Bowen, the technique's Australian creator - has fully understood how the moves work, although it is thought that the unaccustomed stimulation they cause, may lead the brain to investigate the area and release any tension.

SUITABLE FOR children

And adults for a whole range of conditions including asthma, hay fever, irritable bowel syndrome, migraines and stress, as well as sports injuries and frozen shoulders. The emergency move for an asthma attack is illustrated on www.relieve-childhood-asthma.com

COST from £20 to £70 a session depending on where you live.

CONTACT

■ The European College of Bowen Studies, 38 Portway, Frome, Somerset, BA11 1QU (01373 461 873 or visit www.thebowentechnique.com).

■ Bowen Therapists European Register (07986 008384, or visit www.bter.org).

backs up another larger but unpublished study by the European College of Bowen Studies that found it very effective for frozen shoulder.

HOW ACCEPTED IS IT?

The National Asthma Campaign (www.asthma.org.uk) recognises that many asthmatics find complementary therapies useful, but advises patients to consult their GPs beforehand and always to continue to take their medication. It is gaining acceptance, not through a scientific understanding, but because some doctors and physiotherapists find it helps patients.

CAN BOWEN BE EXPLAINED BY SCIENCE?

The basic idea of drawing the brain's attention to a problem then allowing the body to heal itself does not fit in with a conventional view of physiology. It's likely that working with a kindly, interested therapist will make anyone feel better, but it's harder to explain the reported emergency asthma treatment and frozen shoulder studies in this way.

Dr Toby Murcott is a former BBC science correspondent