

Maternal & Newborn care

The Bowenwork offers unique and exciting possibilities in optimising the outcome of both mother and baby in the preconception, prenatal, labour and delivery and post partum situations. This article by Sandra Gustafson highlights how and why this technique is so successful.

History of Bowenwork

Tom Bowen was born in 1916 in the state of Victoria, Australia. Tom did not receive any specific education in healing arts. Higher education was a luxury item for most families in those days, picking up the pieces after the 2 world wars. Tom developed his own understanding of how the body reacts to disturbances and what facilitated its healing, he also had a very strong sensitivity for tissue tension patterns in the body, and how to reset them

He never named his work "Bowenwork" - that was acquired posthumously. He called himself a "Manipulative Therapist" because he was not recognised by any of the bodywork/chiropractic associations of his time. However this did not deter clients from seeking his help. In 1973, a national survey was done in Australia to determine how many people sought therapy outside the conventional medical systems, and Tom Bowen's clinic was recorded as having 13,000 clients per year, an average of 60 people per working day.

Tom was married and had 2 daughters and a son, but none of his family learned the work, or were involved in his practice. In 1974 he met Oswald Rentsch, and Osteopath from a nearby town. Ossie expressed his interest in learning from Tom, and he was invited to attend the clinic in Geelong.

Up until this time, all the work that Tom Bowen did was intuitively derived; he did not have any notes or documents to explain it. It was Ossie Rentsch who followed Tom around and documented his moves. Tom Bowen did not have the academic vernacular to explain his work, and many times he did not know the anatomical names of muscles, so Ossie spent two years interpreting and documenting what we now know as The Bowenwork.

Ossie and his wife Elaine spent a great deal of time with Tom Bowen understanding and perfecting the technique, and then rearranged their own massage clinic to do Bowenwork exclusively.

A little about me...

I am a Registered Nurse who trained and specialised in Intensive Care Nursing in South Africa and then travelled overseas. On my journeys I encountered many forms of traditional medicine that caused me to question the standard medical paradigm in which I had been trained, and my career turned 180 degrees. I became far more interested in traditional, culturally based medicine that had sustained people for centuries before our current systems were developed and I decided to investigate their validity and efficacy, and found myself undertaking another 4 years of study, to

become a Naturopathic Practitioner.

I felt more empowered as a practitioner in the field of preventative and natural health care, and ran my own naturopathic clinic in Cairns, next to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. I still nursed on a very part-time basis in order to keep my skills up, and keep in touch with the Conventional System!

So just what is this technique?

Bowenwork has often been touted as “the most exciting form of bodywork that is revolutionising health care modalities around the world!” Quite a profound statement, but I have come to see it integrated into all sorts of health care arenas (allopathic and traditional healing facilities) and believe it to be so.

In short, Bowenwork is a soft tissue relaxation technique that restores the body's innate ability to heal itself. It is performed by doing short gentle moves over specific points on muscles and tendons, in a specific order, and then followed by mandatory delays to allow the body to process the information it is receiving. It is used to relieve stress, acute and chronic pain, inflammation, and conditions of congestion, headaches and respiratory difficulties, postural problems and many other health complaints. The results are usually long lasting, and often only require 2-3 treatments to be effective.

Due to its relative infancy in the health care arena, there is little documented research on the work, but credible inroads are being made as practitioners take the work into a variety of therapeutic practices. Most of what I share with you today will be anecdotal, based on Tom Bowen's achievements, my experiences as a natural birth support person, using Bowenwork in my office as well as in attending births at home and in hospital settings. I shall also include reports sent to me by a group of midwives using the Technique in a maternity hospital setting in Lancaster, England.

Starting with pre-conception, the work is effective for regulating menstrual cycles and enhancing fertility (in both men and women). It has been said that many a time a child was called “one of Tom Bowen's children” because up until being treated by him, a couple had been unable to conceive!

Pregnancy

In the first trimester, Bowenwork has been useful in managing nausea of morning sickness, fatigue and emotional fluctuations and helping the body adapt to its new state of pregnancy.

As the pregnancy progresses, it has been very helpful in relieving lower back pain, sciatica, hiccoughs, respiratory problems, even asthma and gastric discomfort such as heartburn and reflux, often eliminating the need for medications that may adversely affect the foetus.

I have also used it in helping to arrest preterm labour by effecting relaxation of the pelvis, and often causing the foetus to shift away from the pelvic inlet and reduce the pressure on the cervix.

In the third trimester, I found it became even more valuable to the mother as the pelvic discomfort increased. A pregnant woman can be worked on as often as she needs relief, and can be lying down on her side or seated. Tom Bowen never charged pregnant ladies with sciatica, he had an open door policy where they could just come in as needed, four small moves around the sacrum, within 5 minutes and their pain was relieved.

I have had great success in relieving the discomforts of increased pelvic pressure resulting in varicose veins, haemorrhoids, cramping or aching in the feet, legs or groin, constipation and bladder irritations.

As far as the developing babies go, I have had reports that the babies' activities settled down into a more resonant rhythm with the Mum's and appeared to relax as the sessions were in progress.

One of the most important effects that have been achieved with the work is in optimising foetal positioning prior to birth. I used to work with an independent midwife who did mainly homebirths, and she would send her clients to me before 36 weeks, especially if the foetal lie was transverse or there was a breech presentation.

Rick Minnery, one of the Lancaster midwives in England with whom I have collaborated, sent this anecdote to me on the subject:

"A colleague (midwife) asked me if Bowen might help to turn her baby round (she was carrying her baby breech at 35+ weeks) and was anxious to avoid possible caesarean birth or run the risk of a vaginal breech delivery. I gave her one treatment session with the pelvic procedure, and she phoned two days later to say the baby had flipped over, into a cephalic (head) normal presentation. She was delighted – I was gobsmacked!"

Occasionally the midwives at the local hospital where I worked in Australia would call me and ask me to come in when a woman presented in labour with a posterior presentation. By helping to relax her pelvis it would facilitate the baby rotating to the anterior position, thus preventing the awkwardness of a back labour.

How does it work in facilitating labour?

Bowenwork performed on a woman in labour, helps the process by relaxing the pelvic muscles and ligaments, allowing the baby's head to enter deeper into the birth canal and stimulate effective labour.

During labour, Bowenwork is particularly helpful in managing the pain associated with the increased pelvic pressure. As a birth support person, I spent most of my time doing moves around the lower back and sacrum and upper anterior thighs to relieve the discomfort and encourage the birth of the baby. Once the second stage was reached and the cervix was fully effaced and dilated, there is a specific move that can be done around the coccyx to stimulate more efficient uterine contractions.

All Bowenwork moves can be repeated as often as required during the birthing process.

In the third stage of labour, the coccyx move can be used in facilitating the delivery of the placenta. Once it has been expelled, coccyx move or the perineal move will help to stimulate uterine involution and help relieve perineal pain.

In the early stages of extra uterine life of the baby, Bowenwork can be lifesaving in helping the infant to expectorate any fluid or mucous it may have inhaled. Again, I shall quote a couple of experiences from Rick Minnery:

“The anecdotes with newborns are simply endless – I got the reputation on the post-natal ward of being the midwife who settled the babies with a special “cuddle” (you know what I mean). The colic procedure had given me god-like status amongst some new mums!”

“Two special instances come to mind. First was a 10 minute old baby whom I’d delivered, suddenly became cyanosed – I was sure it had aspirated some mucous. The colic moves were performed and a few short seconds later the baby produced a huge “blob” of mucous and straight away, pinked up again – I was astounded but couldn’t really relate what had happened either to colleagues or the parents. It was a special private moment for the Bowenwork and me.

As was the second occasion with a newborn, when I was performing a routine examination of a newborn at 5-10 minutes after birth. The baby was crying lustily and appeared somehow “angry”. It had been a long difficult labour and the baby had not been in the ideal position to deliver easily (occipito-posterior). On observing the baby’s jawline – it was very apparent that the jaw was out of position which I’m sure was contributing to the baby’s look of anger. Without any great expectation of a speedy response, I performed the TMJ (temporo-mandibular-joint) moves, and before my eyes, over the space of 1-2 minutes the baby’s jaw re-aligned itself, much to my astonishment and the baby’s – who looked up at me with a look as if to say “what the heck did you do to me?”

What about the Mum and baby after the birth?

In post partum, the work can be applied to promote healing after caesarean or for perineal wounds and pain relief. I try and work with a mother as soon as possible after delivery, to help reset the pelvis to its natural state and promote ambulating. There are specific moves that can be used to promote lactation and involution of the uterus, too.

Another story from England: “I’ve lost count of the number of times that lactation problems have responded to the breast procedure. It works well to sort out either under or over production. I cite the example of my colleague Jean Ogden (midwife and Bowen Therapist) who attended a friend and client who was a mother of a 7 month old and wished to continue breastfeeding, but feared she would have to give up due to insufficient lactation. One breast procedure and in Jean’s words – “next day she could’ve opened up a dairy!”

I have had many baby Bowenwork experiences, particularly to do with feeding difficulties, reflux and colic, successfully addressed by doing tiny little moves on the baby. I have even used them on infants who were incubated and ventilated in

intensive care, to help them cope with the stressful situation, and facilitate weaning off the ventilator.

The possibilities of using this amazing technique are endless and very exciting. It is the most wonderful tool I have as a practitioner. It is completely safe, is not known to have any undesired side effects, and can be used in nearly every health condition to improve the quality of people's lives. And best of all, once you have it in your hands you will be able to apply it in all sorts of places and situations from birth to expiration!

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