Setting the Record Straight

We retracted the article entitled “Do Go Gentle,” which we had linked to in our October newsletter, as soon as we heard that it contained many factual errors. Embarrassed as we were to have republished that article unvetted, we are pleased at this opportunity to set the record straight. We hope that having access to the facts will give you more confidence when you represent Bowenwork to clients and potential referral sources.

The original article, still posted at www.wddty.com, includes the 10 information sources that are referenced in the footnotes. We wish to acknowledge the value in those references to published research documenting the effectiveness of Bowenwork and to the importance of fascia in understanding how “Bowen” works, and the article’s coverage of Julian Baker’s contributions. Lastly, we enjoyed reading several new anecdotal reports of dramatic Bowen results.

The rest of this article will discuss the errors found in “Do Go Gentle.” A few relatively minor errors are contained in the first paragraph, where the ® indicating registered trademarks is shown only for Bowenwork®. Bowtech® and Smart Bowen® are registered trademarks as well. NeuroStructural Integration is incorrectly abbreviated as NHT instead of NST.

The most significant errors confuse what Tom Bowen did in his Geelong clinics (from 1959 through his death in 1982) with what Oswald Rentsch, co-founder of Bowtech Pty Ltd and the Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia, did after 1976, first in his own clinic in Hamilton and later, when he began teaching his interpretation of Bowen’s work in 1987. It’s easy enough to imagine the author confusing those two as she reviewed her notes from interviews with practitioners Julian Baker, Isobel Knight and Helen Mawson. Some errors may have come from not remembering who “he” was in a particular quote. [We will save for another article the extent to which what is taught and practiced today reflects what Tom Bowen did in his clinic.]

The most problematic of these mix-ups between Bowen and Rentsch appear in three paragraphs in the article’s “Touch is not just touch” section. For example, a few paragraphs after referring to “Bowen’s death in 1982”, the author states:

Word-of-mouth referrals increased rapidly. In response to an ever-growing client load and general interest in his technique, Bowen, who was too busy in his practice to formally record his work, began teaching his bodywork movements in Australia in the late 1980s.

Clearly the late-1980s teacher was Rentsch, not Bowen. Equally mixed-up is the statement in the paragraph before that one, which claims that Bowen taught four-day classes:
Instead of formalizing his work by writing books or leaving a written record of his work, Bowen taught classes in which participants could become proficient in the movements in as little as four days.

In fact, it was Rentsch who, beginning in 1987, taught three-day (and later four-day) classes. The only way that Bowen “taught” is that between 1973 (or even earlier) and 1982, he invited carefully selected practitioners, including Rentsch, to observe him at work in his clinic one day per week for two or more years each. This confusion about person and time is continued in the next sentence in that paragraph, which goes back in time (from Rentsch’s late 1980s classes) to describe the work of the Webb Committee in the mid-1970s:

In 1975 the government-instituted Webb Committee of Inquiry into Chiropractic, Osteopathy and Naturopathy in Australia investigated Bowen’s practice and found he was seeing an estimated 13,000 people a year, achieving an 80 percent success rate in improving their conditions.

There are several errors in that single sentence, some more significant than others. The facts:
The Committee’s publication of its report in 1975 occurred after at least two years of inquiry. Members of the Committee deposed Tom Bowen on October 8, 1973. Several verbatim Q&A excerpts of his deposition will be sprinkled throughout this article. Tom Bowen was only one of hundreds of unlicensed practitioners who had submitted reports to the Committee about the number of treatments they performed in a six-month period (not the number of patients treated). The report simply published those figures. According to the data Tom Bowen had submitted, if seeing patients twice each, he would have treated 6,500 patients per year, not 13,000; if three times each, 4,333 per year, etc. “Do Go Gentle” even underreports Bowen’s success rate by 9% as, toward the end of his deposition, Bowen was asked:

Q: How would you estimate your success rate?
A: I would have to be quite modest about this. I would say my success rate would be 88 percent.

Here is the last paragraph of the section, followed by our attempt to set the record straight regarding the words and phrases shown here in **bold type**:

For a year, he invited six men to separately observe his work one morning each week. Ossie Rentsch, an Australian osteopath, was the foremost of these observers. After Bowen’s death in 1982, Rentsch and his wife Elaine went on to found the Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia (BTAA), and in 1987, they began teaching The Bowen Technique. After partnering with Julian Baker, The Bowen Technique began to flourish in the UK. At that point the technique could be taught by anyone who, after taking a single course, decided to hang out their shingle and become a practitioner.

The six men whom Tom Bowen had invited to observe him did so over a period of at least eight years, not one year. Rentsch was a massage therapist (not an osteopath) in the years (1974-76) he observed in Bowen’s clinic; four of
the others were chiropractors; one was an osteopath/naturopath who later became an acupuncturist, as well. While Rentsch eventually became foremost in spreading Tom Bowen's work, during those years he was just one of “Tom’s Boys,” Bowen’s affectionate term for the group. The flourishing of the Bowen Technique in the UK began with the publication of an article in the *Daily Mail* in April 1994, at which time students worldwide were required to complete a “Refresher” -- taught by Ossie and Elaine Rentsch personally, approximately one year after each student’s original four-day course -- before becoming practitioners. By then, the Rentsches had begun inviting some experienced practitioners to teach the work after several years of having observed them at least annually in such Refresher classes.

Continuing with other errors in the article (again in bold type and followed by setting the record straight):

Developed in the 1950s and 1960s by the late Australian *sports massage therapist* Tom Bowen, Bowen therapy attempts to address the underlying relationship between musculoskeletal and neurological conditions that, for centuries, has remained something of a mystery. After years of research into various healing techniques and exploring treatment options within his own practice, Bowen identified the soft tissue, or fascia, that covers all the body’s muscles, ligaments, tendons, nerves and organs as the integrating factor (see box, page 66).

Tom Bowen did not stop developing his work by the end of the 1960s; he continued refining his work until shortly before his death in 1982. At the time he opened his practice in 1959, Bowen considered himself to be an osteopath. This fact is made clear in the transcript of his testimony before the Committee, in the first question after they asked him to state his full name, private address, business address and age:

Q: When did you finish your course in osteopathy?
A: Actually I am self-taught.

Q: What were you doing before you took on the profession?
A: I was an ordinary labourer, put it that way, and different ones were coming to me for massage and what have you.

Q: How does it happen that they were going to you for massage? Were you involved with sporting clubs?
A: Yes, football clubs, the little clubs and junior leagues.

Q: How did you come to do massage in the clubs?
A: I joined the clubs and watched the other fellows doing it. It was in 1959 and it got that big I had to do something about it. I went to Melbourne to the Department of Health in William Street and asked them for permission to practice. They said they did not care what I called myself as long as it was not a physiotherapist.

Although we now know that fascia has an important role to play in the effectiveness of Bowenwork, there is no evidence that Tom Bowen “identified … fascia … as the integrating factor.” When the Committee asked about his method of treatment, he did not mention fascia but only muscles and nerves:
Q: What is your method of treatment?
A: Through my fingers and nerve pressure.

Q: How do you know you are on the nerve?
A: I get the vibration from the nerve.

Q: You pick that up through your fingers?
A: Yes.

Q: Do you treat any special parts, such as the back?
A: Mostly the back and the neck.

Q: Whereabouts do the patients have the troubles in the back?
A: Mostly in the lumbar area.

Q: Do you find that the greatest majority of your patients have trouble in the cervical region of the neck?
A: Yes.

Q: You say you have this feeling in your fingers. Does that mean you mainly treat muscles?
A: Muscles and nerves.

Q: I am intrigued how you find the nerve situation.
A: You go for the nerve pressure on the sacroiliac. One finds that the sciatic nerve jumps and you go for it.

Q: There must be very few nerves that are big enough.
A: You receive the contraction from the muscles.

Q: It is an inference rather than something actually observed?
A: Yes.

Although the information provided in “Do Go Gentle” about fascia (a section containing six footnotes) is interesting, the topic of fascia is beyond the scope of this article, as there is no evidence that Bowen discussed fascia with anyone during the 26 years of his practice.

Confusion between Bowen’s own work and that of “Bowen therapists” persists throughout “Do Go Gentle.” For example:

[S]o loose were the criteria for becoming a Bowen therapist and so open to interpretation was the technique itself after Bowen’s death in 1982 that some of his followers developed procedures that relied on ever-deeper work, trigger points and even overt manipulation.

There were no “Bowen therapists” at the time of Bowen’s death. As documented earlier, he considered himself an osteopath from 1959 to at least 1973. After 1981, when he learned that his lack of official credentials prevented his recognition as an osteopath, he changed his business card to “Natural Therapist.” The four chiropractors continued to call themselves chiropractors; the osteopath added acupuncture and naturopathy to his credentials. The Rentsches’
clinic was called “Rentsch Clinic” – no mention of Bowen. One thing is certain: What Tom Bowen did in his clinic was never called “Bowen Technique” or “Bowen Therapy.”

So, what was Tom Bowen doing in his clinic? According to “Do Go Gentle”:

Working with upward of 60 clients a day, Bowen developed a unique series of extremely gentle, rolling moves specifically aimed at inducing what is now popularly referred to as ‘myofascial release.’

Present-day Bowen therapists may describe their objective in that way, but it is unlikely that Tom Bowen did. Refer again to the long excerpt from his 1973 deposition, quoted above, regarding his objectives.

Using only the thumbs and fingers, these moves were applied to different points on the body—points that had only a vague relationship with some known acupuncture points and meridians.

In his 2012 book, *A Textbook of Bowen Technique*, Graham Pennington documents, point by point, that almost every Bowen move is done directly at or very nearby acupuncture points, most of which (unsurprisingly) have the same indications as the Bowen procedures in which they appear. Tom Bowen himself mentioned his interest in acupuncture in the 1973 deposition:

Q: Have you done that much study yourself outside?
A: I only study the books I find are useful.

Q: You still follow it through and attend lectures?
A: I am hoping to receive a book on acupuncture.

Undoubtedly he received it, as confirmed by Chiropractor Romney Smeeton, Tom Bowen’s next-to-last student, who told a group of practitioners a few years ago that Bowen had once shown him an acupuncture book while saying, “This is what we are doing.”

Although our historical review has focused mainly on events in Australia, one paragraph about events in the UK doesn’t jibe with our knowledge of events in the Bowtech international community sometime in or after 1998:

The Rentsches ... chang[ed] the name of their Australia-based program first to “the Original Bowen Technique” and eventually to “Bowtech” ...
Rentsch began using the tagline “The Original Bowen Technique” in 2000, by which time the name “Bowtech” had been prominently displayed for 13 years -- as “© Bowtech Pty Ltd” -- on all training materials and manuals. Beginning in 1987, and for the next 10 years, every one of the colored pages that served as his manual was headed with this title: “The Bowen Technique – an interpretation by Oswald Rentsch.” It follows that Bowtech, Rentsch’s interpretation of Tom Bowen’s work, can justify its “The Original Bowen Technique” tagline because that interpretation predated and inspired the many spin-offs that have proliferated since 1987.

Two final notes depart from our focus on correcting the historical record about Tom Bowen and the development of Bowen therapy:

1. We were perplexed that, in two places, “Do Go Gentle” mentions the importance that Bowen therapists place on taking “occasional breaks” from Bowenwork in order not to create “dependence” in their clients. None of the senior U.S. instructors, including Sandra Gustafson and Alexia Monroe, who have trained with Ossie at least annually since 1991 and 1993, respectively, recalls having heard about either concept. In her classes on chronic conditions, Monroe teaches what Ossie said was Tom Bowen’s guidance to his patients: “I want to see you whenever you want to see me.” The point is that clients’ needs for additional care will vary greatly from person to person once their initial course of sessions has achieved basic balancing. If periodic “maintenance” sessions for clients with serious conditions are considered “dependence,” then what are we to make of Tom Bowen’s free clinics -- initially twice a month, later once a month -- for people with cerebral palsy and other conditions from which they could never recover?

2. Since WDDTY is published in the UK and all of the interviewees reside there as well, please note that “Do Go Gentle” follows British usage, referring to “Bowen treatments,” whereas we in the U.S. refer to “Bowen sessions.” It is to avoid the appearance of practicing medicine without a license that we make a point of explaining to clients and students how, as Bowen practitioners, we neither diagnose nor treat any condition but rather assess and address them. We continue to make these points even though (a) we cannot enforce our word choices on anyone and (b) clients who feel a lot better after a few Bowen sessions than they had after weeks, months or years of medical treatment often say their “Bowen treatments” were successful.

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Postscript: It is our hope that “Bowen” someday soon will be so well known and understood that people in pain will think of it as first resort rather than last resort.

We welcome your participation in making this happen.