

## **Australian alternative therapy is approved for Hong Kong's public hospital system**

At a time when Australia's alternative therapy industry is under siege, with insurance rebates on the verge of being discarded for many therapies and conservative medical groups decrying the teaching of alternatives at university level, to have an Australian derived manual therapy officially accepted by a public hospital system is a fillip for Alternatives.

Bowen Therapy, based on the work of Geelong manual therapist Tom Bowen (1916-82), has been used unofficially by Occupational Therapists (OT's) in Hong Kong for some years but is now officially listed for direct referrals by Doctors and Specialists to OT's within the Hong Kong public hospital system.

The Central Organising Committee (COC) of the Hong Kong Hospital Authority, charged with deciding on what therapies are available for HK's 7.08 million inhabitants, decided that Occupational Therapists, who had successfully trained with the International School of Bowen Therapy (ISBT), could treat patients within the hospital system.

Director of the Melbourne registered International School of Bowen Therapy, Lisa Black, said the COC had approved ISBT's work based on the weight of the success the therapy had been achieving with a broad range of physical issues. "The impact that the Occupational Therapists in the hospital system in Hong Kong have been having using ISBT-Bowen Therapy on an unofficial basis hasn't gone unnoticed by the COC. So far we have trained over 120 OT's with another 32 currently undergoing training. The increase in patient requests for Bowen Therapy has also been an important factor in our work's acceptance," Ms Black said.

ISBT's courses for OT's have been coordinated by the Hong Kong Occupational Therapists Association. There are separate courses for other health professionals held at the ISBT Centre in HK's Central district.

"Initially a couple of OT's did our course some six years ago. Their experiences with the work inspired a growing list of their colleagues to attend and from there the HKOTA became involved. These are very passionate people whose simple aim is to help people as efficiently and conveniently as possible. They work within very strict time frames and often in conditions that we would not necessarily regard as being ideal, but they are getting the results that they, and most of all, the patients want."

### **Major Study Underway**

Ms Black also said that what she believed was the largest official study ever conducted into a manual therapy was currently underway in Hong Kong hospitals.

"The study into the results of our work on adhesive capsulitis (frozen shoulder), approved by the Hospital Authority's Ethics Committee, is being conducted over an 18 months' time-frame with a target of a minimum of 60 patients. Four hospitals are expected to be involved."

Ms Black said no outside funding was involved in the study. “The enthusiasm of the OT’s is driving the study.”

She said that this was an exciting time for the Australian Therapy. “When we first started teaching in Hong Kong we thought the large ex-pat community would be our main group due to the traditional acceptance of Chinese therapies by the locals; after all, Chinese Medicine, including manual techniques and acupuncture, have been around for thousands of years. But the enthusiasm for our work by the Chinese has been wonderful. The OT’s saw a gentle manual technique that fitted well with their rehabilitation work and have embraced it with a passion.”

Part of the reason for, initially, the ‘unofficial’ use, then the acceptance of Bowen Therapy in the hospital system has been, Lisa Black said, because the therapists targeted colleagues whom they knew had problems, including nurses and doctors. “Many had little niggles, like back, neck or knee problems and some had deeper physical issues. Resolving these problems with people on the front line of the health system was the first step in acceptance of the work. Explaining what they were finding with the assessments and then what they were doing with Bowen Therapy hit home for the recipients. Quick resolution of their problems in such a gentle way sealed the deal,” Ms Black said.

ISBT also teaches in Europe and South America pioneering the use of the work in many areas. Ms Black and her Co-Director and Bowen historian Col Murray use Portugal as their base.

Col Murray said that an important factor with acceptance by the OTs of the training offered by ISBT was that, unlike the large majority of schools offering an interpretation of Tom Bowen’s work, patient assessment is an integral part of ISBT training. The OT’s are able to assess the root cause of problems and treat accordingly. Being able to explain to their colleagues they treated where their problem was based and being able to treat accordingly was undoubtedly a big factor in the general acceptance of the work, he claimed.

“There are Bowen Therapy techniques that can be used easily and safely by lay people, producing reasonable results but this is not necessarily useful in the bigger picture. Tailoring treatments to suit individuals based on refined assessment techniques allows targeted treatments and more efficient results. It is because Bowen Therapy in Australia has rarely got past the ‘hobby’ level, with some schools even teaching through clothing, that acceptance by mainstream medicine here is just a pipe-dream. Part of our (ISBT’s) motivation is the fact that Tom Bowen was a master at assessing core issues with patients.”

### **Ruffling feathers**

In his book, *‘In Search of Tom Bowen and the Therapy He Inspired and Lots of Other Stuff’*, Col Murray presented the first ever researched history of Tom Bowen and the possible origins of the techniques, ruffling many feathers in the world of Bowen Therapy to the extent where one association refused to run a positive critique of the book even though it was presented by a therapist who had personally known Tom Bowen.

In the book Col Murray is also fiercely critical of the approach often taken by mainstream medicine towards the popularity of some alternatives.

“It’s an unfortunate fact that mainstream medicine tends to regard anything outside its knowledge base as taboo. Bowen Therapy has been spreading rapidly throughout the world because it is getting often startling results, certainly with the usual back and neck problems but particularly with issues nobody imagined, such as with children with Attention Deficit Disorder and hyperactivity problems. Anyone seriously interested in health issues would have to ask why this is the case rather than simply looking down their nose and saying ‘show us the studies’. It cannot be simply fobbed off as producing a placebo effect.

“What ever happened to scientific inquisitiveness? Governments too have failed to explore the possibilities that alternatives might present to relieve the stress on the hospital system.

“The acceptance of our work in Hong Kong shows that the hospital system there is leading the world on the ability to move with the times and recognise what is most useful for patients instead of being stuck in conservative medicine’s tunnel vision view of the world of health. The weight of success has driven the Hong Kong decision to make Bowen Therapy officially available and we’re hopeful the frozen shoulder study will finally confirm the issue so that mainstream medicine can feel more comfortable,” Col Murray said.

“If the study shows the results we expect, based on our own experiences, maybe then conservative medicine will start to analyse our work, particularly in areas where medical intervention can be avoided, to relieve the stress on Australia’s imploding hospital system,” he concluded.

Ends.

Further information: Ph: 0422 450 261

[isbt@bigpond.com](mailto:isbt@bigpond.com)

[www.bowen-therapy.com](http://www.bowen-therapy.com)

## In Search of Tom Bowen

And the Therapy He Inspired

And Lots of Other Stuff

By Col Murray

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