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For immediate release
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RELIEF FOR CHRONIC BACK PAIN SUFFERERS

Clinical trial shows Alexander Technique lessons are effective

Clinical trial results published this summer in the respected British medical journal *BMJ* show that Alexander Technique lessons provide long-term benefit¹ for those suffering chronic, nonspecific low-back pain.

The results clearly showed that 24 one-on-one lessons in the Alexander Technique led to important improvements in function, quality of life, and reduction of days with pain.

Following 24 Alexander Technique lessons, the average number of activities limited by back pain fell by 42 percent. The number of days with pain one year after the trial started was only three per month for those who had the Alexander Technique lessons, compared with 21 days per month for the control group.

Three months after the trial started, the group that was randomly allocated for 24 Alexander Technique lessons reported eight days with pain over the previous month, and the group that was allocated for six lessons reported 13 days with pain, while the control group, which received no Alexander Technique lessons, reported 24 days with pain. Both Alexander Technique groups showed improvements in function at three months.

This trial is one of the few major studies to show significant long-term benefits for patients with chronic, nonspecific low-back pain. Five hundred and seventy-nine patients participated in a multicentre clinical trial lead by Professor Paul Little of the University of Southampton and Professor Debbie Sharp of Bristol University. Funded by the Medical Research Council and the NHS Research and Development Fund,² the trial assessed benefits provided by Alexander Technique lessons, classical massage, and normal GP care. Half of the patients allocated to each intervention also received a GP prescription for general aerobic exercise (30 minutes of brisk walking or the equivalent each day).

Of all the approaches tested, 24 Alexander Technique lessons, at least half taken within the first three months of the trial, proved to be the most beneficial.

Significantly, a series of six Alexander Technique lessons followed by GP-prescribed exercise was about 70 percent as beneficial as 24 Alexander Technique lessons alone.

There were no adverse events reported by any of the participants allocated to the series of six or 24 Alexander Technique lessons.

¹ <http://www.bmj.com/channels/research.dtl>

² The Medical Research Council funded the trial with £585,000 and the NHS Research and Development Fund contributed an additional £186,000.

Since the effect of massage on activities was no longer significant after one year, whereas the effect of Alexander Technique lessons was maintained, the trial authors concluded that the long-term benefits of Alexander Technique lessons are unlikely to be due to placebo effects of attention and touch, and more likely to be due to active learning of the Technique.

According to Kamal Thapen, chair of the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT), "For over 100 years people from all walks of life have learned the Alexander Technique to overcome back pain. We are delighted that this major clinical study now demonstrates that Alexander Technique lessons are effective. One-to-one lessons, provided by STAT teachers, taught trial participants to improve body use, natural balance, co-ordination, and movement skills, and to recognise and avoid poor movement habits that cause or aggravate their pain."

The price of back pain

Nonspecific back pain accounts for up to five million lost working days in Britain each year³, its overall cost on the National Health Service, business, and the economy amounting to £5 billion a year.⁴ It is one of the most common conditions managed in primary care and a common cause of disability, affecting general well-being and quality of life.

Benefits of Alexander Technique lessons

The Alexander Technique is a taught self-help method that helps people recognize, understand, and avoid poor habits affecting postural tone and neuromuscular coordination. Lessons involve an individualized approach designed to provide lifelong skills for self care that can lead to a wide variety of benefits.

"If it weren't for the Alexander Technique, I would not be living an independent life now, as my back would have prevented this," said a 63-year-old retired woman who participated in the 2006 STAT Pupil Survey. "I wish I had discovered the Alexander Technique sooner!"

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For press inquiries, please contact

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Notes:

1. **The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique** (STAT, <http://www.stat.org.uk>) was founded in the UK in 1958. It is the world's oldest and largest professional body of Alexander Technique teachers.

STAT Teaching members (MSTAT):

- Are certified to teach the Technique after successfully completing a three-year, full-time training course approved by the Society or an affiliated society.
- Adhere to the Society's published Code of Professional Conduct and hold professional indemnity insurance.

³ Source: Health and Safety Executive, Britain, <http://www.hse.gov.uk>

⁴ Source: Health and Safety Executive, Britain, <http://www.hse.gov.uk>

2. Abstract of MRC Study Reported in *BJM* (<http://www.bmj.com/channels/research.dtl>)

Randomised Controlled Trial of Alexander Technique Lessons, Exercise, and Massage (ATEAM) for Chronic and Recurrent Back Pain

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Context: Chronic back pain is a major problem for patients, health care providers, and society, but there are few proven interventions.

Objective: To determine the effectiveness of lessons in the Alexander technique, massage therapy, and advice from a doctor to take exercise (exercise prescription), along with nurse-delivered behavioural counselling, for patients with chronic or recurrent back pain.

Design: Factorial randomized trial.

Setting: 64 general practices in England.

Participants: 579 patients with chronic or recurrent low back pain; 144 were randomised to normal care, 147 to massage, 144 to six Alexander technique lessons, and 144 to 24 Alexander technique lessons; half of each of these groups was randomised to exercise prescription.

Interventions: Normal care (control), six sessions of massage, six or 24 lessons on the Alexander technique, and prescription for exercise from a doctor with nurse-delivered behavioural counselling.

Main outcome measures: Roland Morris disability score (number of activities impaired by pain) and number of days in pain.

Results: Exercise and lessons in the Alexander technique, but not massage, remained effective at one year (compared with control Roland disability score 8.1: massage -0.58, 95% confidence interval -1.94 to 0.77, six lessons -1.40, -2.77 to -0.03, 24 lessons -3.4, -4.76 to -2.03, and exercise -1.29, -2.25 to -0.34). Exercise after six lessons achieved 72 percent of the effect of 24 lessons alone (Roland disability score -2.98 and -4.14, respectively). Number of days with back pain in the past four weeks was lower after lessons (compared with control median 21 days: 24 lessons -18, six lessons -10, massage -7) and quality of life improved significantly. No significant harms were reported.

Conclusions: One-to-one lessons in the Alexander technique from registered teachers have long-term benefits for patients with chronic back pain. Six lessons followed by exercise prescription were nearly as effective as 24 lessons.

3. A GP's View

"From a discal neck injury in 1990 I developed progressive spinal problems. By 2002 I had suffered mechanical neck and back pain, several episodes of nerve root pain at different levels with loss of power and reflexes in my arms. I saw four neurosurgeons who all recommended (different) neck operations. I then developed complex regional pain syndrome and could barely use my right arm. I was in unbearable pain and virtually unable to move my neck. I started taking Alexander Technique lessons and began to experience improvement and lessening of pain after some 12 to 15 lessons. I did regular Alexander Technique for about four years. Progressive improvement since 2003 such that I now have no neck or arm pain. Alexander Technique lessons from a good teacher are an effective technique and were instrumental in my recovery. Based on simple applied principles, Alexander Technique can afford sustained relief from pain of spinal origin. It teaches the body to undo neuromuscular tensions and reduce strain in normal motor function; probably cost effective, were it taught in primary health care. Welcome positive trial evidence."

~Dr. Nick Mann, 45, London