

# I'll Be Back

Lyn Palmer has a close encounter with a bionic man. Sort of . . .

Apparently, almost half the adult population of the UK will report suffering from lower back pain at some time in a year. The number of people with back pain also increases with advancing age, peaking in adults aged 35-55. And the NHS spends more than £1 billion per year on back pain-related costs.

I have great faith in the accuracy of these cheery little statistics, because I'm one of the afflicted. So says Tony Creen, practice manager of The Back Practice on Belfast's Lisburn Road. 'Well...' I hear you Doubting Thomases mutter, 'he would say that, wouldn't he?' A fair point but, unfortunately, I have the pain to prove it.

I've suffered minor back problems on and off for years (I say 'suffered'; what I really mean is 'ignored'). Lately, though, they've been increasing in frequency and severity and, when it got to the point one recent Monday morning that I couldn't actually move without yelping and had consumed far too many painkillers than is good for the average person, I figured it was time to take action. "Tony's got a bionic hand..." a colleague sagely informed me – and I was sold.

## Man or machine

I was slightly disappointed, I must admit, to discover that Tony Creen actually has two perfectly normal hands; but it's what he does with them that is key. In addition to his standard diagnostic practises and physiotherapy treatments, Tony is in possession of the Theraflex Back Care System – his 'bionic hand'.

Tony specialises in Theraflex Spinal Mobilisation, making him one of the most experienced practitioners of this type of therapy in the world. His clinic was the first in Northern Ireland to introduce the system and caters to global demand, treating patients from as far away as Canada and Europe, as well as the UK and Ireland.

Following a thorough consultation during which he nods resignedly at my status as a horse-rider and Body Pump-er, Tony makes a visual assessment of my condition before addressing a number of issues he feels

are contributing to my back pain. Most surprising to me is a 'slipped hip' that I didn't even know I had, and a slight curve at the top of my spine. Next, he treats me to some conventional, hands-on massage which straight away has an amazing effect. Fair dues: he has magic hands, never mind bionic ones, and I'm already feeling the benefit.

According to Tony, a pandemic of back and neck problems is looming on the horizon, "Some therapists would comment that we as human beings are de-evolving! As descendants of the ape we evolved to stand upright; but, through lifestyle changes - spending endless hours slouching in front of PCs and TVs, we are now starting to go backwards.

"What you need to realise," he continues, before moving me across to the Theraflex system, "is that the spine is a completely mechanical structure – and 95 per cent of all back problems are of a mechanical nature. To function properly, your spine needs to be supple and elastic; loss of this is natural with time and age and it's often greatly accelerated by poor posture – which you don't actually have - and a sedentary job or lifestyle.

"The solution is to restore this elasticity throughout the spine, which in turn eliminates the oversteering of the joints in the neck and lower back – and that's where Theraflex can help."

Over 20 years of research and design have led to the introduction of the Theraflex system, which consists of a specially-shaped treatment bed, and a computerised main unit attached to a 'bionic hand': a plate with four pistons powered by compressed air. It is light, safe, efficient and more effective than the hands alone in restoring mobility to the joints of the spine.

In traditional manual techniques, therapists use their fingers to apply a mobilising force directly to the fixed joints. Whilst this procedure is good in principle, it fails because the joints of the spine are much bigger and tougher than the joints of the fingers.

The Theraflex mobilising technique differs



Photos: Chris Neely



in that alternating pressure is applied over diagonally opposed adjacent vertebral pairs. Therefore, mobilisation is achieved through counter-rotational forces and fixed or stiff vertebral pairs are moved through the normal range of motion.

The condition of every joint can still be felt through the handset, defining areas requiring attention, while the rapidity and pressure of the pistons can also be varied. This enables the therapist to work with a speed and energy that would otherwise be impossible to achieve in the same amount of treatment time by conventional methods. Indeed, lying face down on the bed, I'm shocked by how easily Tony can feel - practically before I tell him - where the problem areas are in my back, even through the handset.

During my first session with him, his main focus is on mobilising the joints in my lower back in order to restore my range of movement - even if it hurts a bit in the process. So no, I'm not going to lie to you: there is the potential for pain. And, depending upon the amount of pressure Tony applies through the bionic hand, there is the potential for *quite a bit* of pain. However, I'm a toughie and I already have immense faith in Tony's ability to make me feel better, so I stick it out with barely a whimper.

Basically, the bionic hand feels like being massaged and manipulated by someone with really strong digits, which is as it should be. At its lightest pressure and fastest speed, it's a bit like having your spine drummed on with teaspoons; while at its slowest and strongest, it feels like there's a robot (I like to picture The Terminator) trying to dislodge

your spine from the outside in. Add to this Tony's wide-ranging banter and you're in for a thoroughly entertaining session...

Following my Theraflex treatment, Tony runs through a series of core strength exercises that he wants me to do at home. Finishing up with the application of some 'magic' support tape - "Everything's magic in here," - I'm told to ice the area treated for 20 minutes to reduce any resulting inflammation or bruising; and to stay away from horses and gyms for at least a week, until my next appointment. I also get told off for having a heavy handbag.

"You'll be sore tomorrow," promises Tony, and I am. But I'm still going back for my next session, and the next one and the next one and the next, for however long it takes. Because what I can tell you right now is that I haven't been this loose or pain-free in a long, long time. I can feel my condition improving, even without Tony's say-so. And what's more important at the end of the day, really? A bit of short-term discomfort, or the ongoing health of your spine? I know which one I choose - and besides, I always was a big fan of The Terminator...

*The Back Practice specialises in back and neck pain, headaches, joint pain, and sports injuries such as muscle pulls and tears, as well as post-operative rehabilitation.*

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