

The History of the Bowen Technique

Tom Bowen's Personal History

Tom Bowen was the third child and only son of William and Norah Bowen, who had emigrated to Brunswick, Victoria, Australia from Wolverhampton, England. They were deeply involved with the Salvation Army and were very hospitable, not only to people from the home country but also to drunks in need of a safe haven. From an early age Tom was made to give up his bed for visitors, and his children credit to this early training his later generosity to the downtrodden.

Tom Bowen had a keen interest in animals. According to his younger (and only remaining) sister, Agnes, he wanted to become a doctor. However, during the worldwide Depression, his father, William Bowen, chose to pay off business debts rather than fund Tom's medical education. Tom left school after the eighth grade and entered the labour force, first as a milk carter, then as a general hand at the woollen mills. For a while he worked as a carpenter, his father's trade. After marrying Jessie McLean in 1941 and moving to [Geelong](#), he worked on the Geelong wharves and then at the Geelong Cement Works as a general hand.

Bowen was very athletic; according to his long-time secretary and business manager Rene Horwood, the only sport he didn't engage in was wrestling. He loved swimming, umpiring cricket on Saturday afternoons, and playing lawn bowls. Tom also ran a boys' club with the Salvation Army, which involved a lot of athletics.

Jessie Bowen, Tom's wife, suffered very badly from asthma and was often hospitalised as a result. Tom worked out some special soft tissue 'moves' for her and found dietary advice and some special medicine in Queensland. By following the dietary guidelines and having Tom work on her whenever she had an asthma attack, Jessie received considerable benefit and never again had to be hospitalised for asthma. She died in 1995.

Their first granddaughter was born with cerebral palsy and died at the age of five. Some people suggest this as a source of Bowen's passion for helping disabled people. And, indeed, a good friend of Rene Horwood's confirms that he often said that he ran the clinics for the disabled in memory of his granddaughter.

Bowen was quite deaf and in his later years wore two hearing aids. He could read Rene's lips better than other people's; she therefore often repeated what others said to Tom so that he could lip-read. To keep conversation to a minimum, and/or to reduce the hum of the hearing aids, he sometimes turned them off.

Bowen's Legendary Generosity

Bowen began charging for his services only after a couple of years in practice, when the husband of one patient insisted on it and gave him a donation box for that purpose. However, even after his clinic staff began routinely charging for treatment, Bowen

knew that there were some who could not afford it; and he would indicate to office staff on these patients' record cards that they were not to be charged.

He would open his clinic on two Saturday mornings a month to give free treatments to the disabled ' and in particular to disabled children. (In later years, when his health was failing, these clinics were held only once a month.) A friend and a few of his students helped him with these free clinics. The patients would line up on walkers, in wheelchairs, in chairs, or standing with personal assistants. Bowen would treat them in that line, moving along one group at a time, returning to add the next series of moves, and repeating the pattern over and over. Two of Bowen's students continued running these free clinics in Geelong for twelve years after his death.

Bowen's generosity was seen in other contexts as well: On Saturday evenings, Tom would treat injured footballers for free until the last one had been helped; on Sunday mornings, he would visit the Geelong Prison to treat prisoners. The Victorian Police Board awarded him a medal in appreciation for his help. He often opened his clinic on Sunday afternoons, too, for emergency cases, including animals that had been injured and were in danger of being put down.

Tom Bowen's Clinic

The day at Tom Bowen's clinic was split into morning and afternoon sessions, each two hours long, from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. and from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Patients who rang for appointments were told to come either at 9 or at 2. Thirty people were booked for each session. Patients were given a number upon arrival at the clinic, thus assuring that they would be seen in the order in which they arrived. Although the clinic was always fully booked, appointments were not necessary for pregnant women with lower back pain or people suffering acute asthma attacks; these he would see on demand, often in a hallway.

For treatments he initially used standard, low, single beds. When he saw a hydraulic massage table after more than twenty years in practice, he ordered two for his clinic. He worked mainly from two treatment rooms; one of his later clinics had four rooms. One room contained two beds so he could treat family members together. In addition to seeing patients in the clinic, Bowen often made evening house calls to people who were unable to travel to him.

At his peak, he was reported to treat 100 clients a day on occasion. After sixteen years as in practice, in a 1973 interview, he reported that he was seeing approximately 250 patients each week. His students (more about them below) confirm that he worked at a steady rate of fourteen patients per hour.

Most of Bowen's patients experienced relief of their complaint(s) in one or two sessions. Many also reported relief of symptoms for which they had not sought treatment. This phenomenon is common today, too, in the clinics of Bowen practitioners. In the same 1973 interview, Bowen claimed a success rate of 88%.

How Others Learnt Bowen's Technique

As word spread, people came from all over Australia to be treated by Tom Bowen; a large number of practitioners were eager to learn from him as well. Many came to observe him at his clinic, but no more often than once per week and with a maximum of one observer on any given day.

Bowen's teaching style consisted of answering an observer's questions in brief, nontechnical terms, including a simple 'yes' or 'no' that would leave much to the imagination. Some observers lasted only one day, others a little longer, before leaving in confusion or being asked by Bowen not to return. In all the years he 'taught' in this way, Bowen considered only six students to be fully competent in his methods. He referred affectionately to these six as his Boys.

Oswald Rentsch, one of the founders of Bowtech, was the first or second of Tom's Boys, beginning in early 1974. Ossie, as he is known to all who meet him, spent time regularly with Tom Bowen until Bowen's death in 1982.

How Ossie met Tom Bowen

Ossie Rentsch was a massage therapist when he first met Tom Bowen in Adelaide at a December 1973 conference of naturopaths and natural therapists. As they shook hands, Ossie told Bowen, 'I would like to learn from you.' Ossie was surprised at his own words, since he didn't know anything about Bowen at the time. He was even more surprised when Bowen organised straight away with Rene for Ossie to observe at the clinic on the following Wednesday morning.

The trip between Ossie's home in Byaduk and the clinic in Geelong took over two hours in each direction, so Ossie didn't expect to observe Bowen more than the one time. That's not how it turned out, however: Ossie's wife Elaine, who had suffered a severe neck injury as a young child, became Bowen's client, and events spiralled from there.

As Bowen made no notes or charts, Ossie took on the task of documenting Bowen's work. This involved writing and drawing what he had observed Tom Bowen do, and then returning the notes to Bowen for approval and/or correction. Rene Horwood was very helpful during this process, having worked with Bowen for some 16 years by the time Ossie made his first visit to the clinic. Over the course of several years, Ossie produced a set of notes that is considered by many to be an accurate representation of many aspects of Tom Bowen's technique.

In 1976, Ossie and his wife, Elaine, opened a clinic of their own in Hamilton, Victoria, where they practised the Bowen Technique exclusively. Their clinic was patterned after Bowen's own, and they followed his advice to never advertise. Until Bowen's death in 1982, he visited their clinic from time to time and fine-tuned their moves. In his turn, and like the rest of Tom's Boys, Ossie visited Bowen's clinic, too, to keep up with the latest refinements.

In 1979, Tom Bowen lost a leg to diabetes. Two of his students ran his clinic during his hospitalisation and recovery. Upon his return to the clinic, he worked from a wheelchair. Later on, he used a prosthetic leg that was made for him by friends at the Cement Works. Even then, he continued to work at the same rate of about fourteen patients per hour. Until the day before he was hospitalised for the last time, he continued developing moves to assist his patients. Sometimes he would call Rene in the small hours of the morning to tell her he had worked out how to treat a particular patient. He continued sharing those refinements with his Boys.

After the amputation of Bowen's other leg, complications set in. Shortly before Bowen's death a few weeks later, Ossie promised him that he would make Bowen's name known around the world. In carrying out this promise, he began to transmit the technique to others a few years later. A class in 1986 in Perth, Western Australia, was the first of many. By 1990, Ossie and Elaine were teaching full time, and they sold their clinic in Hamilton. They now travel six months out of the year, teaching in many countries around the world. Over 14,000 students have learnt the Bowen Technique through the Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia (or Bowtech, which is the company name). Some 70 instructors trained by Ossie and Elaine have taught Bowtech seminars in many countries and in multiple languages.