

C O M M E N T A R I E S

A Massage Therapist's Perspective on the Fascia Research Congresses

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Massage therapists have unfortunately endured the position of the lower rungs on the cultural and educational ladder of the medical field despite our clinical experience successfully treating many physical conditions. A hierarchy of respect, credibility, and income has historically separated *all* the fields within the healing arts, not just our own. Physicians, surgeons, naturopaths, osteopaths, chiropractors, and even neurologists, all will allude to a “caste” system and where their particular title falls in relation to others. Warranted or not, human beings love to classify and categorize, even to our own detriment. It isn't often that bench science and clinical experience come together without competition and without ego, in a virtually classless merger, for the greater good. My own practice has been profoundly influenced by such collaboration.

I entered massage therapy training 12 years ago as an alternative to graduate school while my son was young. My first experience with the hierarchy came when a former professor I respected expressed his disappointment at my choice of direction. Nevertheless, the decision proved to be a good one, and I began my practice in October of 2001. I still hungered for a broader medical knowledge to help with the many questions that come up in clinical work. I attended many great continuing education classes including the *Low Back and Pelvic Pain* and *Focus on Pain* conferences, and began a cheerful compulsion collecting medical books of all kinds. I even “crashed” a dermatology nurses' conference nearby to better identify skin cancers on clients.

Then, early on in 2005, an ad for the First International Fascia Research Congress caught my eye and I knew it was too important to miss. Here it was: this connective tissue we handle every day, and bodyworkers, doctors and researchers were getting together to talk about it. The registration fee was more than that of the local weekend CEU courses, but also reflected the huge variety and quality of subjects. It proved to be worth every penny.

The First International Fascia Research Congress (FRC) held at Harvard Medical School assembled a “Who's Who” of massage and bodywork practitioners. The authors of the books on my shelves and those known for their modalities filled the seats. A palpable

buzz of excitement for the collaborative efforts of physicians, cell biologists, acupuncturists, histologists, and therapists of all types could be felt in the foyer at every break. It was an historical joining of the “Micro” and the “Macro” in this ubiquitous underdog of the medical world; and each side of the scope gave credence to the other. Because of the work of FRC coordinators Thomas Findley, MD, PhD and Robert Schleip, PhD, who also happen to be Rolfers, the rungs of the proverbial medical ladder began to disappear. These two visionaries, by welcoming such a diverse collection of disciplines, turned that ladder into a big table where all were welcome to pull up a chair and participate.

As often happens, we went home with heads full of new information to assimilate into our practices. The salient concepts will be different for everybody. But who could forget Robert Schleip's groundbreaking findings of the *independent* contractility of deep fascia? Or French plastic surgeon Jean Claude Gumbertau's endoscopic video of a patient's *in vivo*, loose fascia with its drippy, ever-morphing strands like dew drops on a spider web supporting one another and the overlying tissue. There was so much more, of course, and I'm glad I ordered the DVDs to review. What translated to my practice, however, was a new visualization of the composition and behavior of the substance beneath the skin and the sliding surfaces between the tissues of those on whom I work. It also created many more questions than it answered.

Two years went by before the second FRC, this time held in October, 2009 at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. I'll never forget the answer Dr. Moshe Solomonow, MD, PhD of UC Denver gave to a panel question, that it is difficult *not* to influence the fascia with any type of body work modality. Nor can I forget the report by Mariana Alves-Pereira of Lisbon, Portugal on the effects of low-frequency noise exposure and the increased collagenous thickening of vital organs in the bodies of subjects with over 10 years' service in the airline industry. I learned about Functional Fascial Taping methods, and about fascial implications in mastectomy rehab from Willem Fourie, PT of South Africa. In one session, Dr. Byung-Cheon Lee from Seoul, Korea excitedly revealed stained microscopic images of what he believes may be the *actual* physical

lumen that make up the acupuncture meridians of the body.

Personally, I loved Amsterdam, and will never forget the beautiful autumnal backdrop to the conference and the feeling of pure joy, riding a rented “cruiser-style” bicycle through the cobblestone streets to the University each day. The friends and acquaintances one makes at such gatherings are important, as well. A passionate interest in *any* topic at its most intricate levels can alienate even the most polite dinner party guests. Growth within a field without others to share that interest with is like slogging through knee-high mud. At the fascia congresses I found others like myself, as well as generous scientists willing to help mentor us.

The next FRC will be held March of 2012, in beautiful Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and will prove to reveal more exciting research findings that may change bodywork forever. In my humble opinion, it is not enough to simply rest on the information we received in school when we have access to cutting-edge information. We learned in massage school about epimysium, endomysium, areolar tissue, and ground substance, and memorized where we would find them. Instructors called them “supporting tissues” and showed us how to “release” them. What they didn’t tell us is that fascia will likely be named the 12th organ system. They likely didn’t say it may be named the next endocrine organ, too, or that doctors can retrieve stem cells from its honeycomb-shaped walls to re-inject into injured areas of the body for repair. Our instructors alluded to its ability to remodel, as snarly hair through a comb, but now we have microscopic, photographic confirmation of what we always hoped we were doing to tissue. A picture truly is worth a thousand words.

It is a rare opportunity to be at the ground level of discovery in science. Physicians and scientists are becoming increasingly aware of the role Rolfers, massage therapists, and others who manipulate tissue have played in these discoveries, for without bodyworkers, fascia would still be a throw-away surgical remnant. Indeed, it is still discarded with the skin in conventional medical and premed anatomy labs. We are so lucky to be practicing at this time, with the opportunities of discovery that lie just before us. The ladder, which once separated and isolated various groups, has — at least in fascia research — become a solid table where information is readily shared back and forth. We owe it to the future of our profession, and to medical science as a whole, to help the advancement of fascia research by proudly sharing the vast clinical information at our fingertips. Our participation is needed, welcomed and, indeed, there is still plenty of room at the table.

For more information on the Third International Fascia Research Congress, visit: <http://www.fasciacongress.org/2012/>

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