



**House of Commons Parliamentary Reception -
“Protecting Young Backs”
Speech by Claire Rennie BSc Hons MSTAT November 2006**

GREETING

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and future ladies and gentlemen and thank you for the opportunity to share my experiences with you on the important issues surrounding adolescent back pain.

PERSONAL CONTEXT

I am Claire Rennie, I am 36 and am a teacher of the Alexander Technique. I will quickly run through my background to provide you with context for what I'm about to say. I was a schoolchild ...once ... at Aylesbury High School in Buckinghamshire and spent my teenage years going to and fro with various combinations of school books, a trumpet, a viola, a PE or swimming kit and a tennis racket or hockey stick depending on the season. I progressed through O levels (now GCSEs) and A-levels and went on to take a four-year degree in Engineering and Management at University. Following this I worked in Product Development and Quality Engineering Management in the automotive industry, for Rover, Honda and BMW in England and Japan. In the process, I studied the Japanese language intensively - more heavy books and long desk hours!

EXPERIENCE OF BACK PAIN

During the years that I was working as an engineer I had gradually deteriorating back pain and shoulder pain and then I developed RSI (repetitive strain injury). At the time, I was focussed on getting my work done well and on time and was not aware of my poor posture, the way of handling myself in what I did and how it was contributing to my pain. I also did not realise at this time that the state I was in was largely due to poor postural habits that I had accumulated and reinforced during my childhood and teenage years which were then exacerbated with heavy computer use in my work.

IMPORTANCE of the ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

I was fortunate to discover The Alexander Technique which helps one re-discover the natural poise that you see in young children – younger than all of you here – of most 2 – 3 year olds. I learned that through re-gaining our natural poise in all that we do, a major cause of back pain and thus the pain itself is eliminated. Furthermore, and this is of crucial importance, future back pain is prevented. Through teaching children and young people how they can prevent harmful habits and establish poise in themselves, we empower them help them and encourage them to be healthy and take responsibility for their own health.

IMPORTANCE of POISE

It is not possible, due to time, to go into great detail about how I teach a person to regain natural poise, but I want to stress today is the importance of poise for our health and performance and dealing with back pain. I am guessing that no-one would disagree with that statement but what I find in speaking with people now, and I knew was true in my own case in my engineering days, we may not have realised how significant it is.

We are probably all aware that diet and exercise are important for our health, especially with the huge concerns over the increasing levels of obesity in children and adults at present. But unless we add the importance of poise to diet and exercise in our health message, then it is like having a 3-legged stool with a leg missing. It doesn't stand up.... And then we don't have good poise and we don't stand up well, or sit well, or walk well, or play sport well, or move well, or produce our best across all of our activities.....and often we are in pain –maybe we notice it firstly physically, but often there is anxiety, stress, fear and lack of confidence and self-esteem associated with it.



As my awareness grew of the importance of poise for our well-being, it inspired me to train for 3 years to be a teacher of the Alexander Technique, and I now teach people from age 9 to 82.

CURRENT REALITY

Hence, I would like to give you some snapshots of the current reality? I am not going to give you statistics today, but just a handful comments from some of my students as food for thought:

- Matthew is common in that he was suffering discomfort and back pain, but not to the extent where he knew to say that he needed to go to the doctor, but after his second lesson, when he was in less pain, he said “the Alexander Technique is not only good for my posture, it also helps my violin playing.”
- 10 year old boy with learning difficulties who was also obese – 75 kg and the least popular boy in the class, after an Alexander Technique lesson. He ran down the street of his own volition (and he previously avoided running) and said, “I feel like a million dollars”! He went onto enjoy playing football and doing judo.
- 17 year old girl, currently applying to study at Cambridge, with back pain, sciatica and repetitive strain injury has described to me how she is so often in pain but that she doesn’t tell other school mates or teachers through embarrassment that she can’t hack it. She has had snide comments from PE teachers that she is skiving/ a hypochondriac and all this is putting extra pressure on her over and above the pain itself. She is often in pain to write but the pressure is on - “there is no time to be ill in school life.
- Last year I taught an 18 year old lad who was just starting at Imperial College to study Physics. He described having had back pain and pain in his arms for 6 months which would not go away. Doctors prescribed pain killers and anti-inflammatories. His pain went away with lessons, but I could see the peer pressure he was under to slip back into a collapsed and slumped way of being to fit in with his friends.
- A 19 year old student of English and History was in constant back shoulder and neck pain. After having lessons he wrote on his feedback form, “I feel the Alexander Technique has been one of, if not the most, purposeful undertakings of my life.
- At the RSI Awareness Day at Imperial College London in February this year where mostly adults attended, a young Cambridge University Geology student came to the Alexander Technique stand where we had teachers explaining and demonstrating – he was in constant pain and said to me, “Everyone here is talking as though this is a work related problem – loads of my friends have got it.”
- And then, moving up the age range, a mother of 3 little ones that I am currently teaching who was suffering from constant back and neck pain when standing as well as excruciatingly painful headaches, “Why isn’t this taught in schools? She said to me.
- And finally, an adult male – an Arts Editor, who came to me suffering with constant back pain. When he went to his doctor, his doctor sighed and asked, “How old are you?”
“41”, he answered.
“Well, it’s your age – you’ll just have to live with it – and prescribed pain killers, anti inflammatories and after duress – physiotherapy.
- If ever I go to a party and meet new people as I did at a Wedding reception recently, the usual conversation happens... and what do you do....I explain what I teach and 9 times out of 10, after the embarrassed apologies for their posture and rapid attempts to correct it in my presence they tell me about their back pain. So many adults experience it and not everyone goes to the doctor about it until it has got a lot more severe. This is what is going to happen to more and more of our young people.



RECOMMENDATIONS

And so what would I recommend....Jamie Oliver produced a revolution in attitudes towards diet and school dinners, and what is required here is a revolution in attitude towards poise in school.

- Ensure education on poise with the principles of the Alexander Technique to children and young people from Primary school up, teachers and parents. Unfortunately, the situation is so poor that teaching only children would not be entirely effective as, in my opinion, the children would not necessarily have good role models in their teachers or parents.
- Improvement of school furniture equipment – as an engineer, What is important to note though, is that, the problem is not solved by perfect ergonomics alone – without education. If a person does not know how to handle themselves well – then the ‘perfect desk or chair’ cannot solve the problem. It is though part of the solution.
- More balance between desk work and physical activity in school. Not just ‘booky kids’ with bad health. We don’t want a class system between spirit – mind – and body – we are one whole and we need balance.

ACHIEVEMENTS THROUGH POLICY

If these recommendations were followed, I believe that we would achieve:

- Reduced back pain and improved health generally.
- Increased alertness and concentration in children (breathing interfered with example.)
- Improved performance in all academic subjects as well as sport, drama and music.
- Simply happier kids, natural confidence and self esteem.

WHERE SHOULD the MONEY GO?

But how will this be funded?

If you will excuse the pun, doctors are making a rod for their own backs if, in the majority of cases, they want to treat and cure back pain through pain killers, anti-inflammatory drugs, physiotherapy and finally surgery. Better to put *some* funding into the Education budget to nip problems in the bud or prevent it in the first place than to put a lot more in the Health budget to fix more serious and ingrained conditions of back pain and related disease and illness later, or in the Department of Work and Pensions budget to fund the days lost from work due to musculo-skeletal problems. Hence, as an Alexander Technique teacher and as a taxpayer, I wholeheartedly support the All Party Group for Health and Well Being at School to explore these issues in greater depth.

I would like to invite you to discuss this further and encourage you to talk with me and my Alexander Technique colleagues – teachers and representatives from the Society of Teachers of the Alexander technique here today - in order that we can work towards preventive education to protect our future ladies and gentleman and empower them with the knowledge and skills to look after themselves and fulfil their potential whatever their future careers hold.

AS AN ASIDE

If any of them want to enter the world of politics, they may be interested to know that Sir Stafford Cripps, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Lord Lytton were amongst the students of Frederick Alexander. And some years before the 2nd World War – relevant as we approach Remembrance Sunday, a newspaper report of an all night sitting in the House of Lords ended by stating that “At 4a.m., the only person sitting up straight was the Earl of Lytton.” The next morning, Lord Lytton sent the cutting to Alexander with thanks.

Alexander himself disliked suggestions that he was a healer, he accepted no patients, only pupils, and described himself as an educator.