

Alexander Technique and Parkinson's Disease

Regina Stratil reports on an ongoing project running in conjunction with the Walter Carrington Educational Trust.

"I feel that my gait improves when I have my lesson. It also makes me more aware to stand straight."

"It enabled me to relax and try and stop tremors which I succeeded a couple of times."

"Better posture followed lessons – helped with pain."

"Standing balanced helped with washing up."

"It has potential for people suffering from Parkinson's Disease."

"Great thing to do. Would like to follow up."

(Some remarks from our pupils with Parkinson's Disease.)



done valuable research into Alexander Technique and Parkinson's (published in 2002 and 2005[1]) and which had led to AT being included in the NICE guidelines for Parkinson's. (A planned removal of AT from the NICE guidelines due to a mis-categorisation of AT lessons was fortunately rectified thanks to the intervention of the STAT Scientific Research Group.)

Monika's workshop was a wonderful success and inspired everybody who attended. Shortly after the workshop I got together with three of the teachers who had taken up Trust sponsored places to discuss how we might take this further together. The original group consisted of Liz Dodgson, Loretta Manson, Dai Richards and myself. We all brought quite different temperaments and skill sets to the group, which proved to be fortunate as we complemented each other.

We decided our first step should be to get some more specific training for working with people with PD and especially more hands-on experience. We hoped this would equip us to ultimately offer a workshop for people living with PD ourselves. In addition, we sent a survey to STAT members asking teachers about their own experience and advice for working with people living with PD[2]. In our proposal to the Trust we asked

for funding and support for a small workshop with Chloe Stallibrass and also a series of five sponsored lessons for four individuals with a PD diagnosis - one for each of us. These lessons were organised through the Trust, free of charge for the pupils, and the Trust paid each teacher £20 per lesson. We suggested offering a workshop for people living with PD, including carers – again free of charge for the participants - at the end of this project.

The proposal being accepted, Chloe gave her workshop in February 2017, sharing from her own research and rich experience, and Monika Gross kindly supported us all along with valuable advice and information. Shortly after the workshop the Trust sent out an official call for applications for sponsored lessons. We had an overwhelming number of applications forwarded for consideration, showing a real interest in knowing more about what AT has to offer. The Trust allocated the four places in spring 2017 and unsuccessful applicants who gave us permission were added to a contact list for future opportunities.

The AT is in general a good 'fit' for people with a PD diagnosis. The earlier after diagnosis an individual can have exposure to the Technique the better. Carers should also be considered as recipients of

lessons (or workshops) on their own or in conjunction with their partner, not only because they then can better support and encourage their partner, but also for their own benefit. AT gives people living with a PD diagnosis a tool to manage themselves better in their daily lives and has the potential to restore a sense of self-control – even if it is just a small improvement. It gives people permission to struggle a bit less and use constructive thought to make the best of what they have at any given moment. It offers people strategies that can help them gain more control of movement patterns, with potential improvements in balance, posture and walking.

After completion of the five sponsored lessons, the planned workshop was given in October 2017 at the Trust's Imperial Wharf premises. Invitations were first sent to everybody who had unsuccessfully applied for the sponsored lessons. We had planned for 12 participants in total (including carers) so proper attention could be given to each individual. The workshop was fully booked within a day and a waiting list was soon overflowing. The schedule for the workshop was to give a short introduction, then split up into three groups (we called them 'workstations') for work on specific activities. The activities we chose were semi-supine, sitting and standing, and walking. The groups rotated so everybody could try everything. At the end the groups came together again for questions and closing remarks. After the workshop an online questionnaire was sent to all participants and we received some wonderful and encouraging feedback.

The Trust asked us to offer a second workshop, so that as many people on the waiting list as possible could be catered for. Our second workshop – in November 2017 – was again fully booked within a day and very well received by the

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This is a short report on the 'AT for Parkinson's' project a few colleagues and I started in co-operation with the Trust in 2016. At the time, I was the administrator of the Walter Carrington Trust and although I have since moved back to Austria, the project is ongoing and the intention is to further expand and develop it.

The Walter Carrington Educational Trust (wcet.org) is a registered charity which was established to continue the work of the Constructive Teaching Centre and associated activities on a charitable basis. The Trust had been considering various options of offering Alexander Technique (AT) lessons to vulnerable populations for some time when Monika Gross, Executive Director of The Poise Project, a US non-profit organisation, inquired about renting the Trust premises for a workshop for AT teachers and people living with Parkinson's Disease (PD) in the Autumn of 2016. A quick decision was made by the trustees to offer sponsored places for this workshop to four AT teachers and also four people living with Parkinson's Disease. This seemed a particularly promising field as Chloe Stallibrass had

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participants.

These workshops were extremely encouraging and uplifting. Our participants visibly enjoyed themselves and the work. Huge praise has to be given here to my colleagues! We also were approached by local Parkinson's support groups and several shorter workshops have been given to various groups by members of our group.

After completion of this initial project the Trust was keen to keep the momentum going and potentially involve more teachers and reach even more people living with Parkinson's Disease. We had been contacted by several colleagues who were curious about our activities and interested to join one of our workshops. We organised two more afternoon workshops for people living with PD plus carers and used the mornings of these workshop days to share our own experience with colleagues joining our group. In addition we organised some extra talks and another workshop with Chloe Stallibrass. The two mornings were therefore reserved for a more 'theoretical' introduction and exchange about working with people living with PD. During the afternoons the teachers who had recently joined had the opportunity to assist in our workshops, thereby gaining hands-on experience. The Trust decided to underwrite the project irrespective of external funding so the project could continue without interruption.

Six places to join the project were offered to interested teachers in late autumn of 2017 – all fully sponsored by the Trust and free for the teachers concerned. The only criteria were a valid STAT membership and, as the project was still at an early stage and the administrative work already demanding, it was decided at this stage to restrict the places to teachers operating in the



UK. The Trust received 24 applications and six places were allocated, bringing the teacher group up to a total number of ten.

We were very lucky to have two fantastic external speakers: Daiga Heisters[3], Head of the Parkinson's UK Excellence Network, gave a general overview of Parkinson's Disease, its diagnosis, symptoms and current treatment and also an insight into the activities of Parkinson's UK. She was very positive about the AT and the role it should play in the care of people with PD and was pointing out how special it is that AT is specifically mentioned in the NICE guidelines. Sarah Webb, Founder of the South London Younger Parkinson's Network, talked from her own experience of living with a PD diagnosis as a young mother and gave us valuable insights into the challenges someone with PD might be facing.

The two workshop days in February were a big success and enjoyed by participants and teachers alike!

After those two workshop days each teacher who had participated had the opportunity to have a pupil with a PD diagnosis assigned for a series of up to ten sponsored lessons. These lessons are free of charge for the pupils, with the teachers being paid a fee of £30 per lesson taught, funded by the **Walter Carrington Educational Trust. The call for applications for these sponsored lessons (applicants again had to fill in an online form) yielded 60 valid**

applications and the ten places for up to ten lessons each were allocated. At the moment of writing this part of the project is still ongoing and – depending on available funding – plans for a continuation of the project are being discussed. (If any readers should happen to know any charities or individuals who might like to donate to the Trust to enable this work to continue, please contact the current administrator, Cait Hurley, at: constructiveteachingcentre@gmail.com.)

I would like to close this short report with a selection of feedback we received so far and thank the Walter Carrington Educational Trust and all colleagues who have collaborated, supported and encouraged us!

Selection of 2018 workshops feedback

What did you like about the workshop?

"The warm and welcoming environment, the high teacher/pupil ratio and the relaxed and informal approach."

"The pace was good and very informative without feeling we were being bombarded with science. It was a nice mixture of theory and practice."

"Relaxed and friendly approach with plenty of 1 to 1 help."

"Participatory, one-to-one experience from a variety of teachers, gentle non-didactic delivery, evident good relationship between facilitators, sense of commitment, integrity and enthusiasm from facilitators and teachers, not overambitious, hundred percent relevant, practice and theory integrated, recognition of diversity amongst Parkinson's sufferers."

"One to one nature of course. The feeling of having made progress with movement at the end of the course."

"Understand how my body works and how small changes can improve things."

"I came with low expectations having had brief contact with



Alexander technique in the past but I found the afternoon absolutely brilliant. I was impressed by the sensitive approach, practical focus, and efforts to include everybody. Personally I benefited enormously and understood properly for the first time things I'd heard before but not taken in. Splitting us into three groups and having plenty of breaks providing opportunities for conversation, was an excellent way of using the time available."♦

Notes

[1] Randomized controlled trial of the Alexander Technique for idiopathic Parkinson's disease. *Clinical Rehabilitation* 2002;

16: 705-718. Stallibrass C, Sissons P, Chalmers C. Retention of skills learnt in Alexander technique lessons: 28 people with idiopathic Parkinson's disease. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies* (2005); 9: 150-157. C Stallibrass, C Frank, K Wentworth.

More recently see also: Lighten up: Specific postural instructions affect axial rigidity and step initiation in patients with Parkinson's disease. *Neurorehabilitation and Neural Repair* 2015 Oct; 29(9): 878-888. Cohen RG, Gurfinkel VS, Kwak E, Warden AC, Horak FB.

[2] A compilation of results can be downloaded from the Trust website here, please scroll down to 'Alexander Technique Teacher Survey': <http://wcet.org.uk/index.php/research>

[3] Her talk was filmed, please see a link to the video here: <http://wcet.org.uk/index.php/parkinsons>.