In Memoriam: A Tribute to Robin McKenzie, Musculoskeletal Visionary

“My patients taught me all I know.”

We are saddened by the passing of Robin Anthony McKenzie on May 13, 2013. Robin was a renowned clinician, international speaker, educator, and author. He started his career in the field of physiotherapy in the 1950s and worked for many years in private practice in Wellington, New Zealand.

When Robin began developing his musculoskeletal classification and treatment concepts back in the 1950s and 1960s, there was very little epidemiological evidence to guide him. He was, however, an astute observer of his patients’ posture and movements. By chance encounter, he observed that 1 of his patients, while lying in extension on a treatment table, reported his back and leg pain abolished. That fortuitous moment started lifelong clinical observations, experimentations, and the development of a treatment-based classification system now known as the McKenzie classification system, or mechanical diagnosis and therapy.

Robin’s treatment-based classification system was extraordinarily ahead of its time and transformed the world of physiotherapy and the care of patients with musculoskeletal problems. Robin was the first clinician to recognize the clinical phenomena of centralization and directional preference and the importance of placing his patients at the center of care. The first book he wrote on his self-care patient method, titled Treat Your Own Back, was specifically aimed at educating and empowering individuals to deal independently with their back problems. This always remained a key tenet of his philosophy, and a whole series of Treat Your Own books followed.

Robin initially wrote textbooks for clinicians in 1981 and 1990 on the lumbar and cervical spine; these were thoroughly updated between 2000 and 2006 for the application of his approach to extremity, lumbar, and cervical problems. His work influenced thousands of clinicians. His classification system is one of the most popular methods practiced by physiotherapists worldwide during their everyday clinical practice.

Robin’s ideas and treatment concepts were developed from his clinical practice; the research to support these ideas came later. But that research is now substantial and growing. As Nikolai Bogduk put it in the introduction to Robin’s Lumbar Spine textbook, “Indeed, in many respects, the McKenzie movement has led the way in undertaking research into its precepts, and has implicitly called upon other concepts to catch up. No other system in physical therapy has attracted as much research both from its proponents and its detractors.”

Robin McKenzie was not just a physiotherapist. He enjoyed sailing, gardening, and, above all, was a great family man. He will be deeply mourned by the worldwide “McKenzie family,” but especially by his immediate kin. He is gone, but neither he nor his work will be forgotten. While Robin will be greatly missed by the thousands of therapists and the hundreds of thousands of patients whose lives he influenced and improved, his legacy will forever continue for the benefit of our work and those we treat.

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