



health

MATTERS

The power of posture

BY BARBARA ROBERTSON

Think of yourself as the greatest piece of architecture or engineering. The old adage that "nature knows best" is truly applicable here. When we get out of our own way and stop "doing" we can regain our power through posture. Beautiful posture is the birthright of us all. Research done at Elbert Einstein University in America has shown that the information researched by FM Alexander (an Australian actor who found he developed laryngitis whenever he performed and ended up developing a technique to beat this) is the fourth piece of information put into the foetal brain.

Sadly, many of us lose this beautiful alignment when we are about four, when we start to really notice the adults in our world. Because we want to be like them, we start mimicking them and our way of doing that is to take on their posture. This includes tension patterns, rounded shoulders, shortened necks, shortened spines or awkward walks.

Alexander believed that through re-education it was possible to regain powerful posture. People could be taught to move their head in such a way that the body would return to the dynamic function, poise and grace of the animal kingdom.

His research was in the area of the efficient use of the body in return for optimum performance. In other words, use affects function, meaning how we use ourselves (move, think, feel) determines the results. If you are not on your breath for the first eight words of a presentation you are unlikely to win your audience.

Alexander's second discovery was that all organisms function as a whole. "All together, one after the other," was how

he expressed it. Any movement, raising an arm or taking a step, involves a total neuromuscular or psychophysical response in the same way that a pack of dominos will fall.

Thirdly, Alexander believed, that the relationship between the head, neck and back had a profound influence on the whole organism, its posture and health. He saw this relationship as our reflex mechanism against gravity. When you are able to energise this balance point, simply by moving the head forward and up on the first vertebrae, the whole body lengths and widens effortlessly according to its design. The result is a body that is open and filled with great spaces for the respiratory system to pump efficiently and for all the voice resonating centres to produce clear, melodic and beautifully pitched sound.

The forward and up movement opens the cavities created by our skeletal framework. Humans have 26 vertebrae and from that central support system hang our four limbs. The seven cervical vertebrae not only support the head but provide mobility to the head and neck and protect the spinal cord, while the ten thoracic vertebrae and the floating ribs are vital to our posture. In addition they also protect our organs. The five vertebrae of the lumbar spine carry the weight of the body, if it is not evenly distributed through good posture.

When the weight distribution is ideal in the body these vertebrae are free to provide flexibility and easy movement. They also protect the spinal cord and the nerves located in this area. Sadly, this is an area often grossly abused by humans through poor sitting, resulting in personal pain and its associated costs and unnecessary drains on the Health System.

Between each vertebrae are nature's wonderful shock absorbers which absorb the pressure expended with each placement of the foot. If these discs were not part of nature's plan the brain would receive a terrible shock each time we put a foot down. The spine also protects the spinal cord and the millions of responses that get transmitted through the nervous system.

From F.M. Alexander's point of view it is the spaces created in the body by the skeletal system which are crucial to our health, healing, confidence and quality of communications. They also influence our blood pressure, breathing, depth of sleep, disposition and mental alertness. One of the greatest influences in good health is the ability to maintain a lengthened spine. It is fascinating to concede that we humans are the only animal which shorten its spine and forfeits the power which comes from good posture.

This is the re-education which is focused on in the presentation courses run at The Law Society of NSW. The focus of the courses is on re-dressing habits and maintaining perfect posture.

Lawyers often relinquish their advantage when they are hunched over their computers for long hours, researching a case. Secondly, when performance anxiety associated with preparing for court takes over. Breathing from an open body is key here. Finally, maintaining presence in court. The Forbes Business Magazine tells us that we have seven seconds in which to make a first impression. This is done through powerful posture.

BARBARA ROBERTSON is a teacher of the Alexander Technique and runs courses at the Law Society of NSW. Check out the continuing professional development calendar for details.