

FALL 2012

Massage Matters

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A Journal for Registered Massage Therapists



Robert Libbey, RMT

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Scene

Robert Libbey, RMT

Lessons from the Road to Recovery

by Kari Walker, RMT

Having endured both the suffering of debilitating injury and the grueling struggles of rehab, Robert Libbey brings a unique perspective to his patients and to our profession as a whole. Healing from the traumatic injuries he sustained in his youth not only gave him a profound sense of empathy for others, it helped shape his career path.

During a gymnastics class in 1987, Robert suffered a serious spinal cord injury that centrally herniated three vertebral discs at C3, C4, and C5. He couldn't breathe, had full body numbness, tingling, and severe headaches. As the swelling of the cord decreased, he regained normal breathing function but the altered sensation still lingers today in his left arm. Since the discs are still herniated he has permanent diminished sensation, numbness and tingling in his left fingers. A few years ago his left arm went completely numb, yet he still has motor control. Despite all of this and the post-dural headaches that continue to occur daily, he never takes a single day for granted.

"To make a very long story short, I was incredibly fortunate in that the injury did not completely sever the cord, which allowed me to recover to a point where my symptoms are minimal in comparison to what others have gone through. I am truly blessed," he says.

And the spinal cord injury wasn't his last experience with trauma. Two years later, while being "a typical teenage boy," he shattered his left pelvis, left distal radius and ulna, and suffered a comminuted fracture to all the carpals of his left wrist. Yes, all of them. Robert's long recovery also had an intense impact on him and left him wanting to help others during their recuperation.



Photo credit: DTDeWitt

He began examining the various professions he'd utilized during his own recoveries. Physiotherapy had taught him how to walk again after his spinal cord injury, but it didn't address his lingering

gait and dysfunctional alignment issues. Surgeries had positioned and set his bones, but the problems within the ligaments and membranous tissues were never adequately

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addressed. Chiropractic treatments provided longer lasting results, but were again missing the soft tissue component. Robert was looking for something “better rounded” in the health care field.

It was during an introductory course at West Coast College of Massage Therapy that he knew massage therapy was the career for him. Due to a wait list at WCCMT, he enrolled in the Canadian College of Massage & Hydrotherapy in Ontario, graduated in 1994 and began his career with a specific focus in mind.

“I’ve always been concerned with my patients ‘alignment’ since it was one of my main concerns also. If I was out of alignment in some fashion, I became dysfunctional. My patients were no different. I have great empathy for how they feel and the decrease

in quality of life they suffer.”

Because of all this, Robert’s main focus became alignment techniques. He read books, watched videos and took cadaver courses, but it wasn’t enough. “I felt that there was a lack of instruction in the effective treatment of the joint tissues and a lack of knowledge on how they were connected and contributing to the musculoskeletal complains of my patients. I needed something that co-operated with the tissues, allowing the tissues to dictate the pace and course of treatment.”

During his research, he discovered a technique known as Ligamentous Articular Strain Technique (L.A.S.T.), an Indirect Osteopathic technique developed by William Garner Sutherland, DO, based on principals and techniques from A.T. Still, DO. Following research back to the late 1800’s, Robert then worked forwards applying current evidence-

based research to the technique. Now he’s spent more than twelve years investigating, updating, and practicing those techniques.

“Today L.A.S.T., as I’ve structured it, is a recognized CEU course across Canada and the USA. It is also a recognized CEU course for DC’s and ND’s (Naturopathic Doctors) within BC. I continually search out new and old research that validates the technique along with continual anecdotal testimonials from patients and RMTs I’ve instructed.”

Initially Robert used techniques he learned in school and from CEU courses, then began to question the effectiveness of some of them. In the cadaver lab he tested a number of manual techniques to see if they had direct or indirect influences on the tissues they were intended for. “From this experience, I removed a number of techniques from my practice, started to

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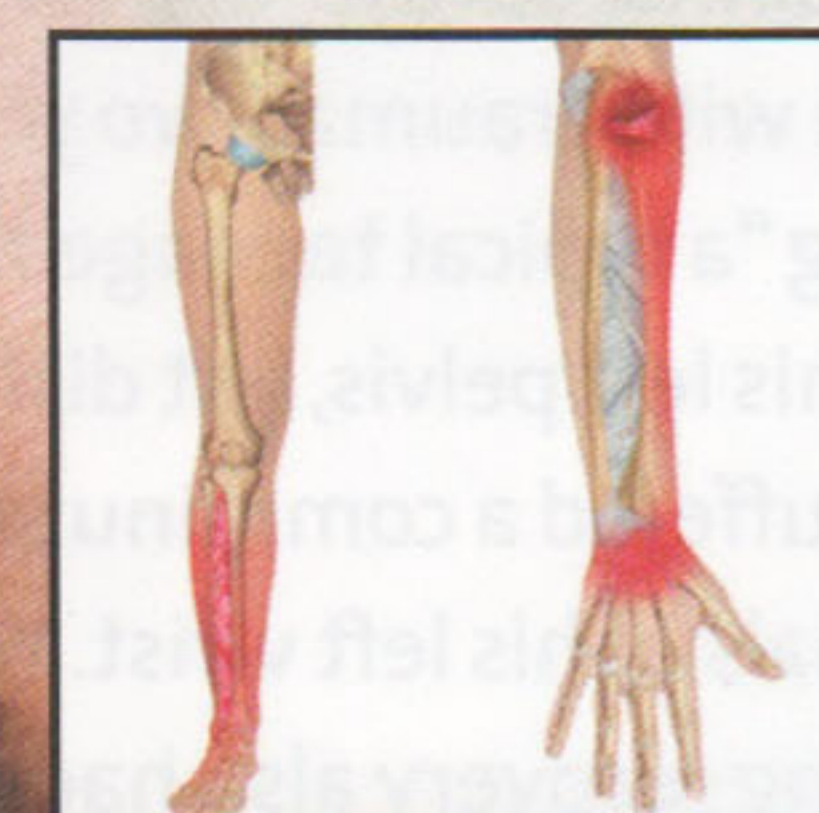
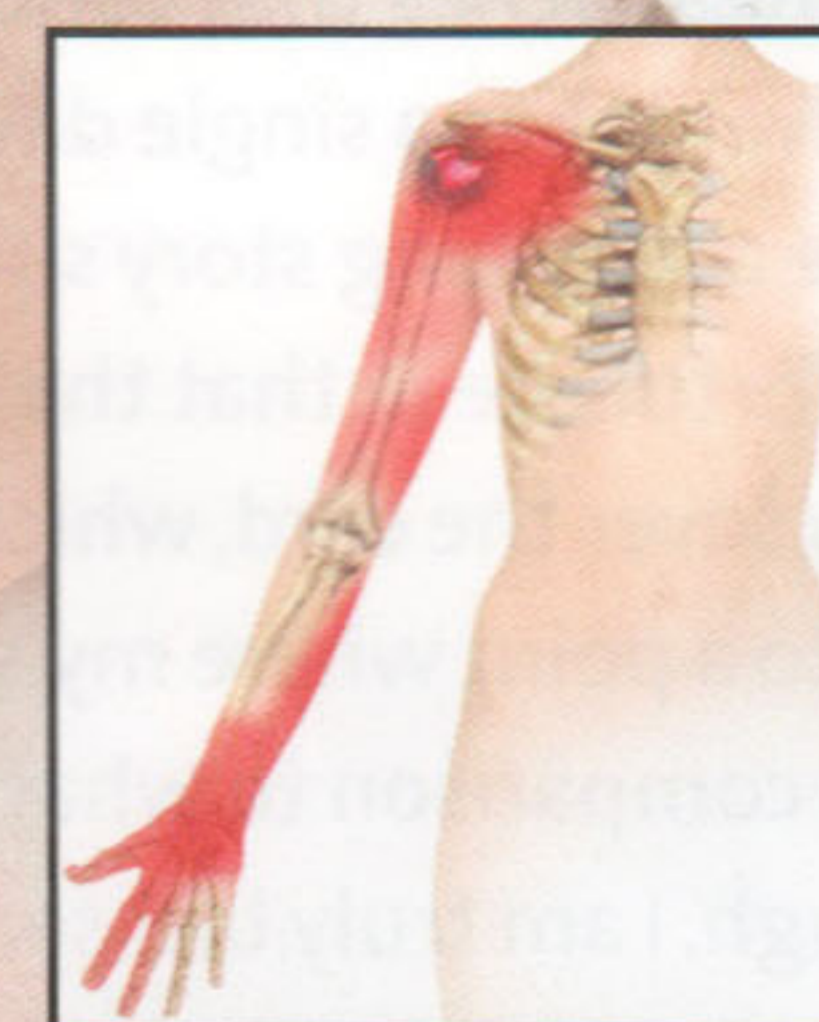
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redefine others and attempted to create alternative techniques to what I had been utilizing.”

Research continues to be a key part of his work, though he cautions relying on it too heavily. “We must never forget that massage therapy is also an art. As much as I feel research should play a larger part in our profession, I’m also aware that we are incredibly sensitive beings. When a manual therapist is truly present in the treatment,

they can develop an alert observational type of awareness to sense the function and dysfunction within the tissues of patients. This Perceptive Palpation allows us to sense subtleties within tissues that standard orthopedic tests miss.”

Robert loves teaching and believes that RMTs have a duty to inform patients about their pathology/condition and the reasons for the course of treatment decided, since part of our job is to assist patients

in making an informed choice when it comes to managing their care. Sometimes that might mean massage therapy is not the right course of treatment for patients.

“We should recognize when the patient should see someone else and make the appropriate referral to those other health care professionals,” Robert says. “Therapists should not look at this as if they are losing a patient, but that they are positively contributing to the

management of that patient’s pathology, condition or injury.”

Now in his 18th year as an RMT, Robert Libbey continues to teach what he loves, spreading the word about L.A.S.T and its benefits. To learn more about L.A.S.T. or the continuing education courses Robert teaches, you can find more information at the following websites:

<http://www.robertlibbeyrmt.com/>

<http://www.lastsite.ca/> ◆