

Janet Travell – a tribute

In this editorial, JBMT is (belatedly) commemorating the 100th birthday of one of the 20th century's most remarkable physicians, Janet Travell. Appropriately, in this issue, Travell's major collaborator, David Simons MD, has contributed an article which defines his current perspective as to how trigger points should be treated. The details (below) about Janet Travell, have been much abbreviated (with permission and thanks) from a tribute to Janet Travell, sent out on the 100th anniversary of her birth, by John Zlatic, to the members of the National Association of Myofascial Trigger Point Therapist.

The importance of the work of Travell and Simons, to those practitioners and therapists who deal with their patient's pain, is immeasurable. The ramifications of trigger point activity are now known to spread far beyond musculoskeletal pain syndromes; as an example the study by Weiss (2001) showed that following treatment of myofascial trigger points, involving manual physical therapy to the pelvic floor, out of 42 patients with the urgency–frequency syndrome (with or without pain), 35 (83%) demonstrated moderate to marked improvement, or complete resolution, while 7 of the 10 (70%) patients with interstitial cystitis had moderate to marked improvement. It is worth noting that the mean duration of symptoms before

treatment, in those with interstitial cystitis and the urgent–frequency syndrome was 14 (median 12), and 6 years (median 2.5), respectively.

Dr. Janet G. Travell was born on December 17, 1901 and lived 95 productive years.

She authored more than 100 scientific articles, and co-authored, with Dr. David G. Simons, 'Myofascial Pain and Dysfunction: The Trigger Point Manual' (Travell and Simons 1983, 1992). This two-volume text is a meticulously crafted contribution to the understanding and treatment of pain. Volume 1 has been revised into a 2nd edition (Simons et al. 1999).

Travell has been described as a true Renaissance woman, as comfortable with writing poetry as with overhauling her Ford Model T's engine. She was Phi Beta Kappa as well as three-time campus tennis champion at Wellesley College, eventually finishing at the top of her 1926 Cornell University Medical class.

Travell's concern with ill-fitting chairs as a perpetuator of muscular pain led her into the realm of industrial seating design where she developed seating specifications for trucks, tractors, aeroplanes, bicycles and plumbing fixtures. She also introduced President John Kennedy to the benefits of the rocking chair, which then became an emblem of his administration and had the effect of repopularising rockers.

Travell served on posts in pharmacology, cardiology and pulmonary medicine, as well as a stint as a New York City ambulance

surgeon. Early in her career, Travell noticed that similar shoulder pain, in different patients, would be diagnosed uniquely depending upon who was doing the diagnosing. The pulmonary doctor would view the pain as a reflex from the lung; the cardiologist would diagnose it as heart reflex pain, whereas a general practitioner, reviewing precisely the same complaint in a secretary who spent all day typing, would determine that the pain was 'psychosomatic'. Travell's research demonstrated that the pain from all three groups of patients could be caused by muscular trigger points ... and that she could eliminate it.

Such was the case in 1955 with Senator John Kennedy. 'I met John Kennedy when he was the junior Senator from Massachusetts'. Travell would later recount. 'He suffered greatly from war wounds and failed surgeries. When he first came to me he had been on crutches so long he had calluses under his arm pits'. Travell relieved Kennedy of his pain and crutches in time for his gruelling presidential race. Given the severity and complexity of his injuries, coupled with his poor response to conventional treatment, it is now generally accepted that without the unique expertise of Dr. Travell, the hobbled senator's political career would probably have ended prematurely.

Once in the Oval Office, Kennedy picked Travell as his personal doctor – the first woman 'White House Physician'. She served both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, as well as their families.

Kennedy encouraged Travell to use her national visibility as a platform to teach other doctors her special skills for treating muscle pain. He also sent to her office a stream of politicians and White House guests to benefit from her work.

John Zlatic (2001) writes:

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Janet Travell's birth, it is deeply satisfying to those who have benefited from, and appreciate, the value of her contributions, to witness an acceleration in the adoption of a trigger point approach to diagnosing

and conquering the modern plagues – headaches, backaches, repetitive stress injuries and other muscular pain of 'unexplained origin'. While those who personally knew Janet Travell will never forget her charm, brilliance, empathy and vitality, it is her giant strides in understanding and eliminating pain that ensure this pioneering woman an enduring legacy.'

JBMT joins in this tribute.

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