

Body Control: The Pilates Way

by Lynne Robinson and Gordon Thomson.
Boxtree (Macmillan), London, 1997 (ISBN
0 7522 2120 5). Illus. 128 pages. £9.99.

This slim paperback volume certainly livens up to its title and will enlighten many physiotherapists who have been wondering what Pilates is (pronounced Pi-lates). Although the book is targeted at the general public and not necessarily health professionals, I found it a most enjoyable read, or should I say exercise session. For that is what it is.

And yet, this is not just another exercise book, but a book aimed at prevention of ill-health, and promotion of wellbeing. To quote the authors in their introduction: 'The aim of this book is to introduce you to the Body Control Method . . . Body Control is all about change. We are never too young or too old to take control of our bodies and initiate change . . . It gives us all the chance to improve, to retrain the body and the mind, putting balance back into both and enabling the body to heal itself' (page 10).

In this Pilates has much in common with yoga, the Alexander technique and physiotherapy. This sentence from the introduction will be familiar to out-patient physiotherapists: 'The combination of strengthening "core" muscles within the torso, changing muscle lengths, rebalancing and relaxing the body, and teaching good postural habits makes this method highly effective in preventing back trouble' (page 15).

Certainly many of the exercises in the book will be familiar to physiotherapists working in the musculoskeletal field. However, due to Pilates' focus on the Eight Principles, viz Relaxation, Concentration, Co-ordination, Alignment, Breathing, Flowing movements,

Centring, and Stamina, I suspect that there is much that physiotherapists could learn from reading this book and practising the exercises.

This of course brings us to the question, which always bothers me, as to whether it is possible to teach exercises from a book, however well written. Certainly the authors have tried very hard, and at least in my own case have succeeded. But is that because I am a physiotherapist and also a yoga teacher? Would their target audience be able to carry out the exercises correctly and insightfully without prior teaching? I think not.

However, I do think that it would be an excellent book to recommend or sell to patients to reinforce and complement the exercises which we teach. Everything in this book is totally in line with modern physiotherapy exercise programmes. I envision that it would be as useful in a physiotherapy department as the McKenzie books have been in treating back and neck pain. What a shame that it wasn't written by a physiotherapist!

Apart from the introduction and a foreword by Pat Cash and Piers Chandler endorsing The Method, the bulk of the book is given over to explaining the exercises. In spite of my reservations about the public's ability to learn from books, the exercises are nevertheless very well explained, with good line drawings and black and white photographs where appropriate.

The format is one exercise per

double page. On the left-hand page is explained the aim of the exercise, the main muscles being targeted, images to help with correct performance of the exercises, reminders of the Eight Principles, 'watchpoints' (ie the sort of cheating movements for which a teacher would be looking), and finally warning or contra-indications. The right-hand page takes the reader through the exercise itself.

The final two chapters of the book are given over to some sample exercise programmes for a daily workout and to specific exercises designed to correct common postural faults, such as sway back, flat back, etc.

There are suggestions for further reading, which I take also to be a sort of bibliography. I was interested to note that this listed at least six publications, out of a total of 19, which would be familiar to most physiotherapists. Sadly, under 'Further Information' there is no mention of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy in relation to the statement: 'The following associations have numerous articles, leaflets and publications which have proved invaluable'. Why not, I wondered, when we pride ourselves on being the exercise therapists *par excellence*.

All in all I found the book informative, easy to read and I couldn't wait to try the exercises! They were deceptively difficult to do well. I shall certainly be recommending this book to my patients as a complement to what they will already, I hope, have learnt in the treatment room. But better still I look forward to Pilates teaching becoming more common, so that I can safely refer my patients to an exercise class confident that they will not re-injure themselves.

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Below left: Single leg stretch to strengthen abdominal muscles and improve co-ordination and control. Shoulders should be down, elbows open, neck soft

Below right: Curl-down to strengthen deep abdominals and promote endurance. Not for those with back problems

