

The First International Fascia Research Congress

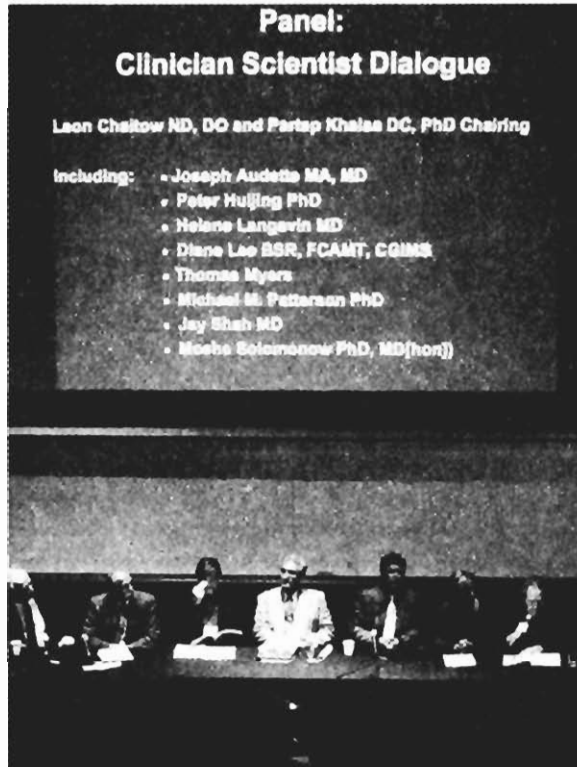
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“They really did it.” That’s what I found myself saying last October, as I worked my way through the crowd to the sleek glass doors of the Joseph B. Martin Conference Center at Harvard Medical School. Two years prior, I’d heard Thomas Findley MD, PhD and Robert Schleip PhD discussing Findley’s long-held dream of bringing scientists and clinicians together to share information and ideas about fascia.

Nothing like this had ever been done. It sounded like a good idea — it also sounded like an unbelievable amount of work. I wasn’t sure it would happen — at least, not so soon.

So I was more than a little taken aback by the excitement and energy among the registration tables at the First International Fascia Research Congress. Over 650 participants, from 26 countries, came from a wide range of disciplines: 55% manual therapists, 25% physicians or scientists, and a remaining 20% that included chiropractors, acupuncturists, and physical therapists. Funding for the Congress came from many sources, including grants from the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), and the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS). The Structural Integration community also put its money where its mouth was. Both IASI and the Rolf Institute® of Structural Integration were the



Panel discussion by clinicians and scientists at The First International Fascia Research Congress

first to make substantial contributions to sponsor the event.

Over the next two days, we were privileged to hear seventeen of the world’s top fascia researchers share their findings and questions. Congress highlights included hearing an in-depth discussion of tensegrity; watching a French surgeon’s film of dynamic fascia; attending the Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation inaugural address given by Dr. Rolf’s sons, Richard and Alan Demmerle; networking with other professionals during concurrent breakout sessions; and attending a Clinician Scientist Dialogue panel.

Until recently, there has been scant fascia research. There has never been a meeting of this kind devoted solely to the subject, let alone one focused on bringing scientists and clinicians together to advance the field. As such, the congress was real news in the science world. Many journals, including Science magazine and the Journal of Bodywork & Movement Therapies, published articles about the event.

In this piece, I attempt to share the First International Fascia Research Congress from the point of view of the Structural Integration community: SI practitioners’ roles in the Congress, their perceptions, and what they think the meeting may mean for our future.

Fascia On Demand

Five months after announcing the congress, The Conference Center’s 500-seat venue sold

out. As Drs Findley and Schleip continued to contact scientists around the world via email and personal visits, more and more researchers agreed to present their work. The response from both the clinical and scientific communities was far beyond anything organizers could have expected for such a novel gathering.

With many months still to go, planners realized the need for more seats and more time. Unfortunately, when they contacted the conference center about adding an additional day, the facility was already booked. By extending conference hours to twelve- and ten-hour days and using audio-visual technology to transmit presentations to auxiliary rooms where they could be viewed, organizers made the most of their resources.

In his opening address at the conference, Dr. Findley explained the situation. Although he apologized that getting all the presentations in to two days was going to be tight, he couldn't help smiling. The audience caught the mood as well. It was hard to feel bad about a problem that was caused by "too much" enthusiasm.

So Much Information, So Little Time

Most attendees agreed that Congress was extremely well organized. "I have been to many a corporate conference, including major IT conferences with big bucks behind them, but this conference was one of the best organized, highest quality conferences I have ever been to in my life," said Eric Root, a Washington state Certified Structural Medicine Specialist. "I cannot say enough to all who put this together. Absolutely stunning in execution and content," he said.

A survey of participants concurred. Attendees were asked to rate 15 aspects of the convention from one to five, from excellent to poor, respectively. 96% of attendees rated the conference "overall" as a one or two — "very good" or "excellent."

But time constraints did take their toll. The most common complaint about the conference was that there was too much information and too little time. Colin Rossie, a Rolwing® practitioner from Australia, said, "... the choice was huge. I wanted to attend several [sessions] that ran concurrently. Though I thoroughly enjoyed and got a lot out of the ones I went to, people who went to other sessions waxed lyrical on what they'd attended. I hope the next one will be run over three to four days and not be so crammed.

Keeping Up

The first congress focused on presenting

Highlights from the First International Facial Research Congress

Seventeen of the world's most respected fascia researchers spoke on four topics. There was an amazing amount of information — way more than can be summarized here. Here are a few facts of interest to SI practitioners. If you'd like to learn more about the research, the conference proceedings book and DVDs are available.

Mechanotransduction

Research presented on mechanotransduction suggests that the effectiveness of manual therapies may be explained as the action of mechanical pressure being converted into chemical signals in the body.

Myofibroblasts

Recent discoveries of the presence of myofibroblasts in ligaments, tendons, and fascial sheets suggest that connective tissue contractility is integral to the musculoskeletal dynamics of normal, healthy tissue.

Fascia Anatomy & Biomechanics

Fascia is defined as dense irregular connective tissue. Ligaments, tendons, and aponeuroses, comprised of dense regular connective tissue, technically don't qualify as fascia.

Fascia pain mechanisms

Studies show increased levels of chemicals associated with nociception, inflammation, and muscle contraction near myofascial trigger points.

In addition to the above presentations, participants enjoyed:

- Concurrent parallel sessions
- Poster presentations
- Concurrent breakout sessions, where you could propose and discuss a topic with other interested parties
- "Strolling Under the Skin": A stunning video tour through the subcutaneous sliding system of the superficial fascia
- The Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation Inaugural Address
- Clinician/Scientist Panel: During the final hours of the congress, eight clinicians and scientists sat together and discussed what we know and don't know about fascia — setting the stage for the next congress, two years from now.

the best and most current basic science in the field. Researchers presented their findings in four main categories: Mechanotransduction, Myofibroblasts, Fascial Anatomy and Biomechanics, and Fascia Pain Mechanisms.

While several Structural Integrators interviewed hold graduate science degrees, keeping up with the rigorous lectures was an issue for many. This was hard science — in every sense of the word. Roling® practitioner, Mike Waefler, saw it as a wake up call. “I hope this will be incentive to really start raising the intellectual bar for our field,” he said. “The large numbers of SI practitioners in attendance proves there’s interest not only in the art but also the science behind what we do. Comments I kept hearing during breaks were to the effect that SI folk were fascinated, although much of it was going overhead.”

Waefler explained that researchers want to know more about what we’re doing so they can ask better questions that will inform future scientific inquiry. “This is an incredible opportunity,” he said. “Most of us need to seriously hit the books to be in a position to take an active role in this kind of discussion. The challenge in that regard is to the schools as well.”

Inspiration

Stuart Bell, a Hellerwork® practitioner with degrees in chemistry and biochemistry, said, “The congress clarified many things for me, and I was inspired by some new ideas about ways to work and ways to think while working. My impression was that those who had little chemical knowledge still got a lot from the congress.”

Because nearly all of our cells must be connected to the extracellular matrix for survival, Bell is particularly interested in how Structural Integration may work directly with cells. “We have perhaps a handle directly to the cell, the cytoplasm, the nucleus, and the nuclear material of most of our cells,” he said. “There is lots of work to be done to test and confirm ideas and new hypotheses, but I think the congresses

offer a new path for thinking in our profession.”

Anna Mariano, a Washington state Certified Structural Medicine Specialist, wrote, “It has been weeks since the Fascial Research Congress and my entire being is still spinning — it was a mind bogglingly inspirational experience! It was comforting to know that the things I palpate and intuit indeed have scientific evidence.”

Personal Connections

In addition to the science, many practitioners said they enjoyed socializing with others from diverse backgrounds who are equally fascinated with fascia. Like the connective tissue that binds us together physically, fascia created a network between individuals. It is often the off-handed conversation with someone you sit with in the lecture hall, or the individual you meet over a boxed lunch, that shifts your thinking.

Scott Gauthier, a Guild practitioner from Virginia, said, “It was really beneficial for me to meet and talk individually with various bodyworkers and scientists that gathered there.” Gauthier said he especially enjoyed the opportunity to chat with Richard Demmerle, Dr. Rolf’s son.

Practical Application

Structural Integrators were mixed as to whether the Congress directly affected their work with clients. Michael Vilain, a Roling practitioner from California, was adamant that it did not. “My overall impression was that, while some of the stuff discussed about the scientific research was cool, it didn’t contribute much to my day-to-day practice.” Vilain argues that a key piece of research is missing: How therapeutic fascial changes affect more than anatomy and physiology — specifically, how our work may alter an individual in terms of “structure or being.” “That isn’t something that modern science can currently measure in a lab, or possibly for the next 50 years,” he said.

While other clinicians left the meeting with new ideas they planned to put to test, still others noticed unexpected benefits only after they got home. On his first day back at his Texas-based



There were a variety of publications associated with the event. Please see “Additional Resources” at the end of this article.

The Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation

Established in 2007, The Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation supports and advances structural integration research. An independent, nonprofit organization, the Foundation is the only organization of its kind solely dedicated to progressing the science of SI.

Dr. Ida P. Rolf, the founder of SI, was a scientist herself and stated that research was one of three essential elements required to advance the field. Ironically, the science of SI has been the least attended. Named in her honor, the Foundation aims to make Dr. Rolf's intention of rigorous SI research a reality.

Determining what research gets funded is a two-step process. The Science Advisory Council reviews proposed projects for scientific merit, with the Board of Directors making final funding decisions. Examples of projects considered for support include:

- Clinical trials
- Quality of life studies
- Surveys
- Safety data
- Individual case studies
- Clinical Audit
- Protocol development
- Pedagogical studies

Get Involved

If you want to support Structural Integration research, making a tax-deductible contribution to the Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation is a logical step.

Presently, the Foundation is awaiting its 501(c)3 approval. In the interim, contributions to the Foundation can be made by check or credit card on behalf of the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration. The Foundation remains completely independent. To make your donation to the Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation, make checks payable to "RISI" and write Restricted for Research in the subject line. Mail contributions to RISI, 5055 Chaparral Ct. Suite 103, Boulder, CO 80301.

To learn more about contributing to the Foundation or submitting a research proposal, contact:

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Rolfing practice, Sam Johnson, wrote to colleagues on the Rolfing list-serve, "I had one of those days where my work seemed to have unexpectedly jumped a level or so. At the fascia conference there were many moments when listening to the presenters and their research, I thought "Very cool. May not mean anything in my practice, but cool nonetheless."

"It seems like I was wrong," Johnson wrote. "All the talk of fibroblasts and mechanoreceptors and cells' amazing ability to structurally respond to mechanical force gave me some more clarity or awareness about what was going on under my hands, in a way that caught me by surprise. That dang left brain can sure feed the right brain."

Creating Awareness

Until recently, there has been relatively little fascia research. For the most part, existing connective tissue studies have been highly specialized and focused on the extracellular matrix. At the Congress, researchers redirected the discussion to the roles fascia plays in structural support, mechanical force, pain, and wellness.

In this initial Congress, scientists and clinicians who deal with fascia met each other and started a dialogue. This was a big step. Many researchers had not met each other and, furthermore, were unaware of Structural Integration. Others said they were so used to thinking about fascia from a micro level, that they hadn't really thought about the implications of their research for manual medicine. The congress created a higher awareness among researchers.

But the Congress also asked us as Structural Integrators to expand our awareness. Some practitioners seemed surprised that current research wasn't answering questions specific to practical application with clients. During a Q&A session, one audience member repeatedly asked a panel member questions that were grounded in assumptions about fascia. Researchers could only point out the assumptions and reply, "We don't know."

Although the science was often challenging to follow, it may have been made more so by Structural Integrators' preconceived notions. Working day-to-day with clients, and discussing our work with each other, we create a language and assumptions about fascia. We want to know about "M, N, and O," while researchers are currently establishing "A, B, and C." Our challenge as practitioners is to continue to develop our work while maintaining the

awareness that we don't yet understand how we create change in the body.

This does not mean that our experiential knowledge isn't valuable, or that we'll have to wait forever for science to catch up. It's a process that will take time. But the more we participate in the research world, the more we can affect what gets studied.

Although Eric Root was extremely impressed with the Congress, he said he was struck by a "huge disconnect" between the clinical and research realms. Root wants to find better ways for clinicians' practical experience to more directly inform research. Root questions how the SI community can best focus its efforts to improve the therapy clients receive, as well as gain respect for manual fascia manipulation. "One idea I have is to create an online database that provides an interface for health practitioners that work with fascia and the scientists and doctors doing the research," he says. "I am interested in what others feel about this."

The Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation

Perhaps a significant part of the solution is the The Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation. Introduced at the Congress, the Foundation is the only organization of its kind devoted to the advancement of Structural Integration research. An independent non-profit, the Foundation supports research that advances our understanding of human structure, improves the practice of Structural Integration, and enhances health and well being.

The Second International Fascia Research Congress

The second Congress is already being organized and will be hosted at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam in 2009. The first Congress built a foundation by presenting what we know about

fascia, the kind of questions we've been asking, and introducing clinicians and researchers. The second Congress, though still steeped in empirical research, will have more opportunities to share the experience and insights of manual therapists. So if you missed the first Congress, the next one may have even more to offer.

Conclusion

The Congress was the brainchild of Structural Integrators Tom Findley and Robert Schleip. With the help of many other Structural Integrators, co-sponsors like IASI, as well as professionals from other disciplines, they made it a reality. Structural Integrators attended in droves. Many left with information that affected the way they think about fascia and our work; others left with a shift in thinking about how our community can interface with the research and medical communities — to everyone's benefit.

The Congress was an exciting event. The energy of dedicated, intelligent, searchers sharing and working together with humor and humility was pervasive.

Perhaps Tom Myers, who participated in the Clinician Scientist Dialogue panel at the end of the second day, summed it up best:

"This was the first time that an audience of clinicians has been able to listen first-hand to a stellar collection of researchers presenting the rich field of the mechanical properties of fascia. Although we're both climbing the same mountain, it will be some time before we join hands at the summit. In this first congress, clinicians learned how scientists ask specific questions and go about finding answers; researchers learned what questions the clinicians are exploring in their daily practices. It will take some years for this meeting to bear fruit but, in the meantime, both sides of the equation were enriched."

Additional Resources *Electronic and print media pertaining to the Fascia Research Congress is available for purchase at www.fascia2007.com and includes:*

- A DVD recording of the Fascia Research Congress is available to order online. The six-disc DVD set contains all the plenary sessions and four selected concurrent parallel sessions. Discs are fully chapterized for quick locating by topic/speaker. A study guide to the recording is available for free download on the website.
- The conference proceedings book *Fascia Research: Basic Science and Implications for Conventional and Complementary Healthcare* contains sixteen full-text articles written by the main speakers as well as all of the abstracts accepted by the Scientific Review Committee.

Further Reading at www.fascia2007.com

Grimm, D, November 2007, *Cell Biology Meets Rolfing*, *Science* 23, Volume 318(5854):1234-5.

Grimm, D, November 2007, *From Rolfing to Researcher*, *Science* 23, Volume 318(5854):1235.

LeMoon, K, January 2008, *Fascia Research Congress Report*, *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies* (available online; not in print, as of this writing)