



Photos by Caroline Bonnavier

Betsy Curtis of Hudson, N.Y., left, and Maggie DelGrande of Housatonic, Mass., right, practice a breathing technique taught to them by Tom Fleming at Fairview Hospital in Great Barrington.

A breathing breakthrough

A new alternative can empower asthma sufferers and boost endurance for athletes

BY VIVIAN ORLOWSKI

For everyone from ailing asthmatics to active athletes, improving breathing can bring life-enhancing changes. While athletes can train in a variety of ways, asthmatics are given little choice but to rely on pharmaceuticals. When each breath is a struggle, there are few options. But in New England, the Buteyko breathing technique, an innovative program from overseas, is offering a

surprising alternative.

"Even those with severe asthma can learn in a few days how to improve their breathing while reducing drug dependency," asserted Tom Fleming, who first studied the Buteyko method five years ago. As a Berkshire-based registered respiratory therapist, he has provided standard asthma treatments to about 8,000 patients during the past 17 years, many of them in the emergency department of Fairview Hospital in Great Barrington, Mass.

Relief from asthma is something this writer has personally experienced as a result of taking a Buteyko workshop in 1999 and continuing the breathing exercises till today.

"The Buteyko method can also help those with other respiratory problems like allergies, bronchiectasis, emphysema and sinusitis, as well as aiding athletes to increase energy and endurance," Fleming explained. The Buteyko method uses short breathing pauses and other tech-



Tom Fleming, a registered respiratory therapist, teaches the Buteyko breathing technique to Betsy Curtis, right, and Maggie DelGrande.

niques to develop new breathing patterns. The exercises, done in a seated position, take about 20 minutes. They help correct respiratory patterns, like mouth breathing, that make people vulnerable to environmental triggers including dust, pollen, cat dander, cold weather or over-exertion.

Controlled breathing through the nose helps stabilize the internal balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide — providing enough carbon dioxide to prompt the release of more oxygen from the hemoglobin.

This phenomenon, known as the Bohr Effect, is described in standard physiology textbooks. The improved oxygenation of the body helps reduce vulnerability to a whole range of triggers — including stress, which is often identified as a key factor in precipitating asthma attacks.

Originally developed by Dr. Konstantin Buteyko, a Russian physician and professor of

physiology, the breathing technique has a track record of clinical research and practice in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. However, it is just becoming known in the United States.

Tom Fleming, one of only a few respiratory therapists in the country certified as a Buteyko teacher, was trained in New Zealand. He works in the cardio-pulmonary department at Fairview Hospital in Great

Barrington and also volunteers as an emergency medical technician with local ambulance squads.

Active in sports, Fleming has a black belt in ketsu-ka karate and has used the Buteyko approach to improve his own performance and that of other martial artists.

In his cardio-pulmonary rehabilitation work and in his private workshops on the Buteyko technique, Fleming has

instructed over 300 people suffering from asthma and other respirator ailments. He recently completed a follow-up study on 108 people, from ages eight to 93, that he has instructed. Seventy-seven percent reported improved quality of life enabling them to reduce or eliminate the need for reliever inhalers.

Nurse Barbara Dolby gained control of her asthma and reduced medication as a result of Buteyko instruction. Having suffered with asthma and allergies since early childhood, she worked at Fairview hospital for 41 years. It was there that she learned the technique from Tom Fleming in 2002.

Skeptical at first, Dolby saw a noticeable difference after doing Buteyko practice for three weeks. Cautiously, she reduced her extensive roster of medications in consultation with her physician.

After three months of using the Buteyko method, she was able to get off all oral asthma medications.

On a recent trip to Disney World, Dolby was able to keep up with her son and granddaughter, walking around in 90-degree heat all day, but never needing an inhaler.

"Previously, I would have been wheezing and needing to use my rescue inhaler every few hours," she said. "Now, it's just unbelievable — Buteyko is a life-changing experience.

"However," Dolby warned,

"the problem with the Buteyko method is that's easy to become discouraged at first. Changes don't happen overnight and you need to stick with it."

Dr. Edward Weiner, a primary care physician in private practice at Fairview Hospital, agreed that patience and persistence are needed to see results from Buteyko techniques. Dr. Weiner has referred many patients to the hospital's respirator' rehab program as well as a dozen people to Tom Fleming's Buteyko workshops.

In each case, he credits Fleming's motivational skills in helping patients stick with the exercises to better manage asthma and chronic bronchitis.

"I have tremendous respect for Tom and his mission to help people," Dr. Weiner said. "Patients see that he really cares and this has made a difference in their attitude and health."

Medical trial

- The first medical trial of the Buteyko breathing technique in North America is being conducted at Foothills Hospital in Alberta, Canada. Professor Robert Cowie of the University of Calgary will present the results at Canada's 7th National Conference on Asthma and Education in November.

Most clinical trials of the Buteyko method have taken place where the technique is better known: Australia, New Zealand, Russia and Great Britain,

Articles published in peer-reviewed medical journals include: "Buteyko breathing techniques in asthma: a blinded randomised controlled trial," the Medical Journal of Australia, 1998
"Buteyko Breathing Technique for asthma: an effective intervention," The New

Zealand Medical Journal, 2003

"Effect of two breathing exercises (Buteyko and pranayama) in asthma: a randomised controlled trial," Thorax, 2003

Links to more studies of the Buteyko technique can be found on the Buteyko Institute of Breathing and Health Web site at www.buteyko.info.

Finding workshops

- Although Buteyko instruction is offered on four continents, there is no single international standard for Buteyko teacher certification, nor is there any state licensure. One of the most thorough teacher training programs is the Buteyko Institute Method offered by Jennifer Stark in New Zealand. About a dozen teachers in North America have been certified by this program. In the Northeast and Canada, the

teachers are:

Tom Fleming, registered respiratory therapist, South Berkshire Breath Connection.
He can be reached at 413-258-2858 Workshops in Great Barrington, Mass.. and throughout the Northeast

Chris Bauman, Buteyko Canada, www.buteykocan.com; 519-375-6069. Workshops in Toronto, Ontario and throughout Canada

Important steps

- Attend an informational meeting before committing to a workshop or to private instruction. Speak with the teacher and carefully check credentials and track record. Always confer with your physician about any medication changes in relation to the breathing exercises.

Dr. Weiner noted the relaxing role of the Buteyko breathing exercises. "Any time you can slow people down, it's beneficial not only for asthma, but also for hypertension and

overall well-being."

Cardiologist Dr. Philip Bhark also emphasized the crucial role that breathing plays in stress reduction by bringing us mindfully into the

present moment. "Focus on breathing helps balance our fast-paced lifestyle," he said. "Controlling our breath through the nostrils prevents hyperventilation and helps diminish the



Photo by Caroline Bonnavier

Tom Fleming teaches a class of special breathing techniques for asthma sufferers at Fairview Hospital in Great Barrington, Mass.

overdrive of our sympathetic nervous system and modulate the parasympathetic nervous system."

"Our heart rate slows, our blood pressure is lowered and our mind regains a sense of calm," said Bhark. "Breathing is a unique phenomenon that affects our whole existence — both our emotional and physical well-being. In a society that relies on synthetic materials and fabricated foods, breathing helps re-connect us to nature and to the source of life energy."

Bhark directs the program in cardio-pulmonary rehabilitation at Fairview Hospital. He reports that his patients are pleased to learn simple breathing and exercise techniques from Tom Fleming as part of their rehab program.

In his own experience as a runner, Dr. Bhark finds that breathing through the nose and keeping the mouth shut makes running more enjoyable. "I can now reach the same distance at the same

speed, but with less effort. It enhances a sense of control and wholeness."

Psychotherapist Ethan Dufault also has experienced increased benefits in sports as a result of his Buteyko exercises. As a biker, runner, swimmer and soccer player, he has observed improvement in his athletic performance since he started using the Buteyko technique in 2000.

"I especially saw the difference in being able to sustain freestyle swimming more comfortably," he commented.

Dufault originally took the Buteyko course to help deal with increasingly severe seasonal allergies. Using the Buteyko method as part of his daily routine has enabled Dufault to stay free of the respiratory congestion and other allergy symptoms that used to plague him every autumn. He finds that the 20-minute breathing routine meshes well with his meditation practice and helps reduce stress.

Accordingly, he also recom-

mends it to clients whom he counsels professionally.

Marilyn Kellar, a senior citizen from New York, found that the Buteyko method made a big difference, not only in her daily life but also that of her husband. With continuing respiratory infections from bronchiectasis over 10 years, Mrs. Kellar had required use of antibiotics and daily percussion treatments by her husband in order to loosen mucous from her dis-

tended bronchial tubes. This condition also caused coughing and snoring, which awakened her husband.

As a result of instruction by Tom Fleming and practicing Buteyko exercises three times a day, Mrs. Kellar no longer is troubled by mucous accumulation and snores only infrequently. Never a smoker, she credits the Buteyko method along with a vegetarian non-dairy diet with her health improvements and freedom to travel more easily.

"Buteyko breathing is such a simple thing to do — it's been a godsend," she said.

Dr. Melanie Levitan of Lee Family Practice, noted that while the Buteyko exercises may be simple, they require perseverance and commitment to provide on-going respiratory relief. Seven of her patients with asthma have learned the technique. "Those who are able to maintain regular practice can exercise more easily, reduce their medication and improve their quality of life," she observed. But, she added, "Patients who don't keep up their practice, gradually lose the benefits."

Dr. Levitan would like to see more clinical research on the Buteyko method. She summarized the key challenge facing patients who want to use the technique, "The Buteyko method empowers people to control their own destiny, but when people have the power, they also have the responsibility."