

PATRICK HANNAGAN

# Behind the stars' backs

Garry Trainer has a super-stellar client list. Simon Crompton meets a celebrity spine man

"Ow!" I can't help yelping as Garry Trainer gives my back what he calls an MoT, his lightly applied but strangely forceful fingers once again finding a sore point I never knew I had. And it strikes me that, given the fact that he can cause such suffering, Trainer, an osteopath and acupuncturist, must be awfully good at curing bad backs to have the clientele he does.

He has a list that would make Max Clifford envious: Sir Paul McCartney, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Winslett, Emma Thompson, George Michael, Eric Clapton, Lou Reed, Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp, Robbie Williams, Bruce Springsteen ... and there are dozens more where they came from.

What's more, most have been happy to supply glowing testimonials to promote Trainer's new book *Back Chat* (Aurum Press, £10.99), billed "the ultimate guide to healing and preventing back pain". Sir Paul said: "Garry has always been ahead of his time and has a special talent, which I have enjoyed for years."

So what do you do to become a back guru to the stars? In Trainer's case, along with his clinical skills, you can't help thinking that an easy Kiwi pushiness has helped. In 1985, not long after coming to England to train as an acupuncturist and osteopath, he acquired one or two actor clients, and it wasn't long before he put forward a proposal to the Royal Shakespeare Company director Sir Trevor Nunn: since he was treating so many of his actors anyway, shouldn't he be put on retainer? It worked, and since then Trainer has been put on contract with the theatre producer Cameron Mackintosh, the rock promoter Harvey Goldsmith and virtually every big London theatre.

"I like the glamour," says Trainer, a youthful 50, who admits to having got a buzz from touring with pop wildmen Depeche Mode last year. "I party well. And I think there's something in the New Zealand personality not to be so bound by rules and regulations, and I think that helps me to relate to celebrities. People in the arts had a more open-minded attitude to osteopathy and acupuncture at the time when I was starting up, and that's what opened doors for me."

But Trainer is far from awestruck by fame, and his down-to-earth blokey-ness, which must appeal to celebrity clients, also seems genuine.

For all his clinical expertise, surfing remains his first love. He dropped out of school in Auckland without qualifications at the age of 15, not because of academic failure, but to make the most of a once-in-a-lifetime tropical cyclone that had arrived off the coast of New Zealand. "It was the best eight weeks of surfing you could imagine and the best decision I ever made," says Trainer. A career in sports was his ambition but, at 17, his back was nearly broken in a rugby accident. After 18 months in recovery, he reconsid-

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ered his future and realised that being mobile and free of pain could be the most important thing in life. He trained first as a nurse in New Zealand and then came to the UK and trained as an acupuncturist, funded by stints as a masseur at Champneys.

Trainer was still in search of something to relieve his own back pain and had found that acupuncture "knocked my socks off". Then he trained as an osteopath, aware that acupuncture had limitations as a diagnostic tool. And, ever since, he believes his success has been based on combining the strengths of acupuncture as a painkiller, with massage, osteopathy and conventional diagnostic techniques such as MRI scans.

"Osteopathy asks a lot of questions about whether it's the disc, the ligament, the nerve or the muscle causing pain. So when I take a history from a patient, I'm mentally trying to get an idea of what structures might be involved, and then I test that hypothesis with my examination." Then it's often massage that solves the problem. "It's the mother of all therapies," he says.

Backs are at the core of his practice, based in clinics in Harley Street and Primrose Hill, North London. "I understand backs. I know what it feels like. I've learnt backs from the inside out," says Trainer, who still gets flare-ups from his own injury, though he tries to keep fit in the gym, and with the occasional surf.

"I work a lot with doctors, and anything that

looks as if it might possibly need surgery I send to them, and anything that doesn't need surgery they send to me. It's pointless and wrong for practitioners to treat someone who requires something more specific than they can provide. It's also wrong to make treatment decisions without knowing exactly what's going on."

The key to treating back problems, says Trainer, is to know what stage the injury has reached, and to treat or not treat as appropriate. If a ligament or muscle has just been strained, for example, it's often best to leave the body alone and not interfere with the early healing process.

That kind of down-to-earth common sense can be hard to find when it comes to such a common, debilitating and, for performers, career-threatening complaint as back pain. For many performers, it's a matter of maintaining back health with massage, but many — such as Antony Sher in his famously hunched depiction of Richard III — are performing such physically demanding roles that minor problems regularly need to be diagnosed and nipped in the bud.

Trainer inspires confidence. Which is why, uncharacteristically, I accepted his offer of a quick back once-over. And why I'm wondering whether Brad Pitt, too, yelps so pathetically.

*Back Chat* (Aurum, £10.99) is available for £9.89, p&p free, from [timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy](http://timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy); 0870 1608080

## Back to basics

Here are Garry Trainer's top tips keep back pain at bay:

### What to do if you have back pain

**Day 1** In the first 24 hours after wait and see how it progresses.  
**Day 2** If the pain is turning into a feeling, that's a sign of improvement.  
**Day 3** If the pain is subsiding, you're getting better by itself. If not, go to a doctor or good osteopath.

If at any time you cannot walk ten steps without your back pair excruciating, you should consult immediately.

### Preventing back pain

Trainer recommends a daily stretching regimen as the most important thing you can do. There are four basic stretches: bending forward, bending sideways, bending backward, and bending round. He is looking out for everyday opportunity to stretch, such as at the desk, or in

For further information and details visit [www.garrytrainer.com](http://www.garrytrainer.com)