THE HISTORY OF

Konstantin Pavlovich Buteyko

and the

Buteyko Breathing Method
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Konstantin Pavlovich Buteyko was born on January 27, 1923 into the small farming community of Ivanitsa, Ukraine (about 93 miles from Kiev). Inheriting his father’s enthusiasm for machines, Konstantin was enrolled in the Kiev Polytechnic Institute until World War II interrupted his studies and Buteyko joined his country’s armed forces, as a truck driver. After his experiences during the war, he felt compelled to study what he called “the most complicated piece of machinery of all” — the human organism.

In 1946 he enrolled into the First Medical Institute in Moscow. During his third year he started working in the Clinical Therapy Group as the manager of the Laboratory of Functional Diagnostics which was under the Department Head, Professor Evgenly Mikhailovitch Tareiev.

It was during this third year at the Institute, that he was given a practical assignment which involved monitoring diseased patients breathing. He spent hundreds of hours sitting by patients’ bedsides, recording their breathing patterns prior to death. He noticed a considerable and uniform deepening in patients breathing with the approach of death. By recording these increases, he found that he was soon able to form a prognosis on how many days or hours were left before the patient’s death occurred. This assignment determined the area of his future interest.

“In my third year, I was given a practical assignment hereby I had to work on a method for myself how to auscultate (listen with stethoscope) the patient’s lungs. I asked a patient to breathe deeply, as a result of which he fainted (due I was told to oxygen saturation of the brain). This event determined the area of my future interest.”

— KONSTANTIN BUTEYKO

Dr. Buteyko graduated with honors from the First Medical Institute in 1952 and continued his experiments independently along similar lines. He would ask healthy subjects to breathe deeply for a period of time, and found that they would become dizzy and nauseous, developing asphyxiating symptoms such as wheeziness and coughing and then would eventually faint.

During the second month of this independent work it occurred to him that certain diseases might develop as a result of deep breathing. He himself had suffered from hypertension for some time, and had often pondered its causes. By measuring
his carbon dioxide levels, Buteyko discovered that his body's level was lower than recommended. It was know that over-breathing lowered carbon dioxide levels in the body. He theorized that if over-breathing was causing his low levels, then by correcting his breathing he might be able to cure his disorder.

He immediately began experimenting on himself. Soon he had trained himself to breathe in a more reduced way. He found that by doing so some symptoms such as headache and rapid heartbeat also reduced. When he increased the depth of his breathing, the symptoms returned. Dr. Buteyko concluded that he had discovered the reason for his hypertension. He immediately set out to devise a program by which a patient's breathing could be quickly and effectively measured and then, if need be, reconditioned. By using his method he was able to get his hypertension under control.

Dr. Buteyko checked and rechecked his theory on his patients. He measured the breathing patterns of sufferers of asthma, angina and other diseases, discovering, without surprise, that they too were hyperventilating. Once again by correcting these patients' breathing to an acceptable level he was able to normalize their carbon dioxide shortfall and their attacks stopped immediately. When they were asked to return to their previous breathing patterns, their attacks resumed. It was clear that Buteyko had stumbled across a very important discovery, a global discovery, and that current medical thinking was upside down.

Through further research, he was able to lay down the theoretical foundation for this idea: hyperventilation causes a depletion of carbon dioxide; low levels of carbon dioxide in the organism cause blood vessels to spasm and also cause oxygen starvation of the tissues. This results in a whole range of "defense mechanisms" that have been previously misunderstood and labeled as diseases. It was not difficult to surmise that vessel spasming occurring in hypertension could occur also with other types of diseases, for example: stenocardia (angina pectoris) with the resultant myocardial infarction (heart attack); end arteritis (inflammation of the innermost coat of an artery, usually occurring in legs) or ulcerative stomach disease. Scientific data associated with the physiological role of carbon dioxide is discussed in more detail in the "Buteyko Theoretical Manual."

Buteyko worked very intensively at the Central and Lenin Medical Libraries researching his theory. Was it really possible that for the entire existence of medical science such a simple thought had never occurred to anyone else? He learned very quickly that the answer to this question was yes. For centuries, the majority of the
human race had taught their children to breathe deeply, and no one, even for a moment, tried to reduce their breathing. During his research, Buteyko was lucky to learn of a few experiments supporting the viability of his thinking. (See Bohr, Holden, Priestly, Henderson, De Costa). This then led to Buteyko sharing his thoughts with his teachers, but he found no support from any of them.

Later that year Dr. Buteyko became a clinical therapy intern under Professor Tareiev again. Here he was given a chance to establish a functional diagnostics laboratory. This project failed due to lack of funds, personnel and equipment. An attempt to establish the laboratory under the auspices of the Ministry of Health in Moscow was also unsuccessful – the necessary equipment was made available, but not the scientific personnel. In 1958 Dr. Buteyko was invited by Professor Meshalkin to join the Institute of Experimental Biology and Medicine at the Siberian Branch of the USSR Academy of Science (where Professor Meshalkin was the Director) in Novosibirsk, Russia. He was named the Manager and once again he set about the task of establishing a laboratory of functional diagnostics. This project was completed in 1960.

In 1958-1959 Dr. Buteyko conducted clinical studies on nearly 200 people, both healthy and sick, where various measurements (association, deductions, correlations, etc.) were obtained. All of these confirmed the truth of Buteyko’s discovery. On January 11, 1960, he presented his work to the Scientific Forum at the Institute and tried to explain the concepts of his thinking. He told those present of the experiments, which showed the objective linear relationship between the depth of breathing and the content of carbon dioxide in the body, and vessel spasming and the degrees of illness.

The medical community had a difficult time accepting this theory. However in spite of that Dr. Buteyko received temporary approval from Professor Meshalkin who chaired the Forum. He said he understood the perspective and wanted the research continued.

During the next 10 years of the laboratory’s existence, Dr. Buteyko and his team were able to obtain extensive information on the basic functions of the human organism — whether healthy or diseased. The laboratory was equipped at the highest level. There was a compendium of over 40 various instruments capable
of registering almost all basic functions of the human organism, and producing approximately 100,000 pieces of data per hour. Analysis of this information was done on computers, mathematically deriving physiological measurements and the various conformities of the body’s processes.

Two hundred medical specialists were trained in the laboratory; most of who had suffered from one condition or another and successfully treated themselves from asthma, hypertension or stenocardia had been successfully treated and had totally recovered from their illnesses.

Despite this Professor Meshalkin refused to allow Dr. Buteyko’s request for a trial to be conducted at the Institute’s clinic. Soon after, Dr. Buteyko’s laboratory was confiscated and his ideas were silenced. Eventually the Institute was disbanded and closed.

In spite of this disbandment, it may have saved his laboratory. He was able to keep one-third of all the instruments, personnel and the original laboratory premises. From 1963 to 1968 the laboratory was attached to the Institute of Cytology and Genetics of the Siberian Branch of the USSR Academy of Science. Professor Meshalkin’s clinic was reassigned into the system of the Russian Ministry of Health. Dr. Buteyko’s repeated requests to accredit his method had not met any support whatsoever.

On January 1, 1968, a trial was carried out in Leningrad at the Institute of Pulmonology under Professor Uglov. Shortly before this trial the Minister of Health, Professor Petrovsky paid Dr. Buteyko a visit to his clinic stating that if he successfully treated at least 80% of the patients given to him, Professor Petrovsky would make recommendations for an immediate implementation of the Buteyko Breathing Method into standard medical practices. He promised also to make available a 50-bed clinic for the continuation of Buteyko’s clinical work. Professor Petrovsky had one condition however, and that was that the patients selected for the trial were the most serious and difficult cases, not otherwise treatable by conventional methods of science.

Of the 46 patients who underwent Dr. Buteyko’s treatment, 44 (95%) were officially recognized as cured. Only 2 from the 46 had a smaller positive effect. Some of the patients had up to 20 different conditions each. One of the female patients had been recommended to undergo a mastectomy, as she was diagnosed to have a malignant tumor in the initial stages. She had refused the operation. She was
included on the list of patients because of her asthma. She recovered not only from her asthma but also from the rest of her complaints, including the tumor. It should be added that the two patients not included in the success rate were also relieved of their diseases after further treatment.

Consequently, in effect, Dr. Buteyko could describe the results of his method as having had a 100% success rate.

Despite slow acceptance from conventional medical world, the Buteyko Breathing Method continued to gain popularity and to spread not only in the Soviet Union but also around the world. During the 1990s, while on a business trip to Russia, Kyle Alberts suffered an angina attack and was taken to the hospital to recover. He was taught the Buteyko Breathing Method helping him totally recover. He, in turn, sponsored Alexander Stalmatski, a student of Dr. Buteyko’s to come and teach this method in Australia. He was successful in eventually bringing this breathing method to New Zealand, the United Kingdom and many other European countries.

Alexander Stalmatski taught a large number of Buteyko courses around Australia. People who benefited by this method soon trained to become teachers themselves. Eventually the method became introduced to New Zealand by Russell and Jennifer Stark who had been trained by Stalmatski. Their company, Buteyko New Zealand, have helped over 4000 people learn the Buteyko Breathing Method (as of 1999).

The USSR Committee on Inventions and Discoveries formally acknowledged Buteyko’s discovery in 1983 and issued the patent entitled “The method of treatment of hypocapnia”, (Authors certificate No. 1067640 issued on September 15th, 1983). Interestingly, the date of the discovery as listed in the document was backdated to January 29th, 1962. His discovery was officially recognized 20 years after it had been made.

From 1995 to 2006 a number of medical trials confirmed the effectiveness of the Buteyko Breathing Method.


• Strathclyde trial (600 participants) http://www.mydr.com.au/asthma/buteyko-trial-supports-use-in-asthma


In June, 2002 there were Debates in the British House of Commons about the Buteyko Breathing Method.

In 2007 Mayo Clinic listed the Buteyko Breathing Method among the most promising alternative therapies for asthma.

In 2008 one of the major medical insurance companies in Ireland, AVIVA Health offered Buteyko workshops coverage as members benefit (expand Asthma Care tab at the linked page). The Buteyko courses are covered in Australia as well.

In 2008, The British Thoracic Society in their Guideline on the Management of Asthma upgraded Buteyko Breathing Method to category B, meaning that there are high quality clinical trials supporting the effectiveness of the method in reducing asthma symptoms and bronchodilator use.

In April of 2009 Coventry University in the UK offered a course to train nurses how to teach the Buteyko Breathing Method to patients with asthma.

In 2012 the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services’ Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) finds the Buteyko Breathing Technique achieves “medium to large improvements in asthma symptoms and reductions in reliever medications.” The AHRQ findings mirror studies by the British Thoracic Society in 2008 and The Australian Department of Health and Aging in 2005.

Over 200 medical professionals teach this therapy at present from centers located in major towns throughout Russia. Buteyko wrote over 50 scientific publications detailing the relationship between respiration and carbon dioxide and at least five PhD dissertations were written by his colleagues. The basis of the Buteyko Breathing Method detailing the relationship between carbon dioxide and breath holding-time forms part of medical curriculum at Universities.

Professor Buteyko died on Friday, May 2, 2003. His wish was to be buried in the country of his birth, the Ukraine. His resting place is in Feodosia in the Crimea, Ukraine.