

Janet Travell, MD -- Reflections

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Dr. Travell, the first woman appointed as physician to the president of the United States, prescribed that John Kennedy sit in a rocking chair to ease his back pain, and had him wear a lift in his left shoe to counter a leg-length discrepancy.

Editor's note: Dr. Janet Travell, known within chiropractic for her trigger point work (e.g., Travell JG, Simons DG. Myofascial Pain and Dysfunction: The Trigger Point Manual. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1983), died Aug. 1, 1997 of heart failure at the age of 95 at her home in Northampton, Massachusetts.

She was most widely known for being President John Kennedy's appointed physician, treating his troublesome back pain, the result of injuries he received when commanding a PT boat that was sunk by the Japanese in the Pacific during WWII. She also attended to President Johnson for several years, and later remembered those Washington days in her autobiography *Office Hours -- Days and Night*.

In 1965 she joined George Washington University as an associate clinical professor of medicine, and became professor emeritus in 1988.

I first met Janet Travell in 1987 when she was my guest at LACC's 2nd Annual Interdisciplinary Symposium. She had never before visited a chiropractic college. Her warmth and vitality were stunning. In her mid-80s at the time, she dexterously manipulated the body to find relevant dysfunction, and treat it with her spray, stretch and moist heat methods. Then she would straighten herself up and offer postural advice or demonstrate an exercise.

I vividly remember Tom Mayer saying that patients who "doctor shop" have psychological problems. Dr. Travell looked at him for a moment, and then pointedly remarked that as long as they're shopping, it means they still have hope! She riveted a full house in our performing arts center that day in 1987. It was not a question of people holding her in awe because of her life's achievements. She was on top of her game and gave a tremendous presentation on hidden causes of low back pain, such as trigger points in the soleus muscle. Her childlike joy with her own discoveries permeated her talk and demonstrations, making everyone aware of just how special a human being they were spending time with.

Myofascial trigger points were Janet Travell's life's work. She cared for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and traveled often with President Johnson's wife, Ladybird. The wealth of her stories is unimaginable. Once she was visited by a famous Chinese doctor who inquired when she had gone to China to learn about the "points." Today, David Simons works with incredible endurance to finish the 2nd edition of Volume 1 of the *Trigger Point Manual*. Her work has had a long influence in chiropractic from Raymond Nimmo and continues unabated today.

Myofascial pain is a reproducible source of a patient's symptoms that should be taken into consideration in all of our clinical plans. Joint dysfunction or muscle inhibition may be a crucial perpetuating factor, but the pain of trigger points is dramatic evidence for the patient that you

have found the source of their trouble.

My last visit with Janet Travell was in Palm Springs. Simons led the workshop while she sat reading a stack of journal articles a foot high. Participants individually came up to her to ask specific questions, or for a demonstration. She was reading about nutrition and drug interactions, eggs and cholesterol, and many other topics. The first woman to attend Cornell medical school, she taught pharmacology for some time before resuming an interest in physical medicine. Her father was a physiatrist and together they wrote an early paper on sacroiliac manipulation in the 1940s.

Janet Travell will truly be missed. Her contributions aside, I will most remember her youthful energy and enthusiasm. Being with her during her later years, one could not help but see the little girl inside. Her eyes had the light of youth burning brightly.

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