The Dr. Vodder method of Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD) has become the most well-known and extensively used lymphatic technique around the world. It is used as a part of Combined Decongestive Therapy (CDT) in the treatment of patients with lymphedema and for many other conditions. This article describes briefly the life of Dr. Emil Vodder and development of the main treatment method used today for patients with lymphedema.

Emil Vodder was born in Copenhagen, Denmark on February 20, 1896. After graduation from high school he studied drawing, art history and languages. He began studying medicine at the University of Copenhagen but at the end of his eighth semester he contracted malaria. After recuperation he was no longer admitted to finish his medical studies. In 1928 he obtained a PhD in art history from the University of Brussels in Belgium.1

At an early age Dr. Vodder had already become interested in exploring the lymphatic system, the mysterious “clear water” as lymph was called by scientists centuries ago. He studied the research of Aselli, Pecquet, Rudbeck and Bartholin, scientists from the 16th and 17th century. It wasn’t until the 18th century however that it was discovered that the whole body contained lymph vessels and that the task of the lymph vessel system is to absorb tissue fluid. This fact was doubted for a long time. By studying relevant literature, in particular that of Bernard, Carrell and Drinker, Vodder realized that lymph is omnipresent as the environment of living cells. In a foreword to the Dr. Vodder textbook of Manual Lymph Drainage2, Vodder quotes Drinker: “The lymph system is the most important organic system for the life of human beings and animals”.

In 1929 Vodder and his wife Estrid, a naturopath, moved to the French Riviera and established a clinic where they started treating patients. Vodder palpated swollen lymph nodes in the cervical region in patients suffering from acne, migraines or sinus problems. He had the vision that the real cause of these pathologies was congestion in the swollen “lymph glands”, or lymph nodes as we call them today. The careful, circling, pumping movements of the skin that he developed helped to resolve the problems presented by these patients even though it was considered a taboo to work on swollen lymph nodes at that time.

The Vodders moved to Paris in 1933 and continued their studies into the lymphatic system, especially the work of the 19th century anatomist, Sappey. They took a systematic approach to working with the lymphatic system using these very light techniques, so as not to cause hyperemia in the skin. They then presented their work with a lecture at a congress in Paris in 1936. After the Second World War a clinic was established in Copenhagen but it was not until the 1950’s that the Vodders began teaching in Europe and attracting more attention to their work.

Estrid Vodder, Günther Wittlinger and Emil Vodder, PhD
In 1966, Günther Wittlinger met Dr. Vodder and then assisted him in teaching and working in his Copenhagen clinic. In 1967, together with Dr. Asdonk, a German physician, they established the Dr. Vodder Society for Manual Lymph Drainage which still exists today. Together with Asdonk, Vodder and Wittlinger helped establish the MLD treatment protocols for many conditions.

Another breakthrough came in the 1970s when a Swiss scientist, Mislin discovered that stretching lymph vessels in a particular way caused them to increase in frequency and amplitude of contraction. This confirmed that the special technique of the Vodder method of manual lymph drainage with its light circular movements of the skin and gradually increasing and decreasing pressure, stimulates the dermal lymph vessels by increasing their rate of pulsation and amplitude. If the source of the lymph is in the loose connective tissue, as Vodder always maintained, Mislin proved the Vodder method could decongest the loose connective tissue of the skin, and therefore remove microedema which is the source of many problems. Mislin literally said“ if Vodder had not invented his method as he did, we should invent it urgently”.

There were scientists such as Still and Winiwarter who mentioned that light massage techniques are helpful in treating lymphedemas. It was Emil Vodder who developed a manual method with precise movements which is recognized by many scientists as being able to stimulate the lymph flow. When the decongestive effect of Vodder’s method was confirmed, the treatment of lymphedemas began. A precise technique, adjusted and adapted to the individual tissue pressure will obtain the desired results.

With Günther Wittlinger who stood truly at his side, Vodder found the fighter who made it possible that Vodder’s method would survive in its original form. Hildegard and Günther Wittlinger were both certified to teach, not only by Vodder but also by the German Medical Insurance that oversees the training of therapists and instructors. Together the Wittlingers introduced Dr. Vodder’s MLD to many countries around the world including the USA at a New York conference in 1972. That same year the Wittlingers established their Dr. Vodder training centre in Austria as well as a clinic devoted to lymphatic disorders.

In 1985 the German Massage and Physical Therapy Association awarded Emil Vodder the Rohrbach-Medal in appreciation for his life-long work. Emil Vodder died in 1986 at the age of 89 and Estrid Vodder died 10 years later, aged 99. Günther Wittlinger died also in 1986 and the work of the Vodders has continued on with Hildegard Wittlinger. Her two sons, Andreas and Dieter Wittlinger are both physical therapists and they manage the Austrian training center and clinic in conjunction with physicians specializing in lymphedema management.

Many scientists, physicians and therapists have investigated the Dr. Vodder method of MLD that was created more than 75 years ago. It has found world wide acceptance and recognition in the medical and physiotherapy fields, particularly in lymphedema management. In particular, Prof. P. Hutzschenreuter of the University of Ulm, Germany conducted research into the efficacy of the Dr. Vodder method of MLD.

In the early 1970’s Prof. Dr. M. Foldi in Germany also worked together with clinicians such as Günther Wittlinger and researchers such as Dr. J.R. Casley-Smith to establish the protocols for the treatment of lymphedema. Complex Decongestive Therapy, also known as Complex Decongestive Physiotherapy, Combined Decongestive Therapy, Decongestive Lymphatic Therapy etc., all use the same essential components: manual lymphatic drainage techniques, compression therapy, exercise therapy and skin/wound care. Research into this approach has been carried out since the early 1980’s and there has been a mounting body of evidence to prove its efficacy. Lately, the emphasis seems to be on deconstructing the “combined” approach and trying to establish the efficacy of each component. In her 2010 systematic review and meta-analysis of evidence, M. McNeely concluded that MLD and compression therapy had a statistically significant effect in reducing upper extremity lymphedema volumes in breast cancer patients. The Dr. Vodder method of Manual Lymph Drainage has been in use for over 75 years. If taught and performed with the correct technique and pressure, MLD can have profound effects on a patient’s life. We are grateful to the founder of this method for the impact it has had on so many patients’ lives.

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References