Dinosaurs among us causing chaos and confusion

Adam Meakins

The recent Hollywood blockbuster *Jurassic World* tells a story of how extinct species have returned to the present only to cause chaos and confusion. Unfortunately, this Hollywood fantasy is a reality within the world of physiotherapy with dinosaurs among us causing chaos and confusion.

The dinosaurs I am referring to are the many iconic, influential and idolised clinicians and researchers who, despite a new era in understanding pain and growing evidence of the biopsychosocial model, still stubbornly refuse to change their methods or mind-set, and continue to promote and teach outdated methods of assessment and treatment.

MUCH MORE THAN BIOMECHANICS

The dinosaurs, despite giving occasional lip service to the biopsychosocial paradigm, have no desire to support or promote it. They have vested interests in peddling snake oil treatments, and selling their courses and books that promise simple assessments and quick fixes, from realigning subluxed sacroiliac joints or twisted thoracic rings, to releasing psosas muscles or immobile kidneys.

The dinosaurs continue to worship predominantly at the altar of biomechanics and in the normalising of movement. They continue to teach the identification and correction of incomprehensibly subtle joint and muscle imbalances, in spite of any robust evidence of reliability or validity. They continue to fail to consider the many other non-mechanical factors that can, and do, contribute to pain.

The dinosaurs always look to adjust and fix so-called movement flaws and believe this is fundamental in reducing pain in all they see. They truly believe there is a correct way for us all to move, they truly believe they know what this is for everyone and they truly believe they can, reliably and at all times, identify this.

This prehistoric thinking fails to recognise the growing evidence that many common pains and pathologies correlate poorly with biomechanics or so-called movement flaws, and that many other factors must be recognised.1-5

This is not to say biomechanics is unimportant. Of course there are times when biomechanics matter,6 but just not as many or as often as the dinosaurs would have us believe.

CHALLENGING DINOSAURS

Dinosaurs often surround themselves with loyal and devout followers, and command authority from positions of almost unquestionable status and experience. This makes any attempts to question or challenge them daunting, intimidating and socially awkward, with a fear of being seen as inferior, or at risk of ridicule from peers.

This is perfectly understandable, as dinosaurs do often quickly resort to their authority with anyone who is brave enough to challenge them. They will soon state that, as an authority their views and opinions carry more weight and validity than do the views and opinions of those who are not. This, as Carl Sagan tells us, is baloney.7 Those in authority have been wrong and made mistakes in the past, and will do so again.

In science, there are no authorities, there are only experts. We need experts, their role is indispensable, and the work and effort to become an expert must be recognised. However, it must also be recognised that an expert is, by definition, someone who knows more and more about less and less.8

Experts have a tendency to fail to see the bigger picture. Non-experts, however, tend to be very good at seeing the wood for the trees, and as such can be better placed at recognising the wider perspectives and implications, such as clinical relevance and practical utility. Being a non-expert should not discourage the challenging of an expert.

DISAGREEMENT IS NOT DISRESPECTFUL

It can be challenging to confront dinosaurs as they can also be fierce and ferocious, roaming in packs, attacking, en mass, anyone or anything that threatens their position or status. The most common tactic used is to change the ‘point at issue’, usually by reporting about the tone of an opposing argument.

Dinosaurs often claim to have been offended or insulted by the way a differing view has been presented or expressed. They will then continue to focus the rest of the argument on this rather than the original point made. It is one of the main reasons why a strong case presented by a non-expert can lose its momentum, and obvious logical flaws can be lost in a fog of related but unnecessary issues.

We all have a choice of whether to be offended or not; this choice varies from person to person as to who or what does. However, in any debate, being affronted by someone’s views, opinions or comments is not a counter argument.

END OF AN ERA

Dinosaurs should be extinct. However, many are thriving because of outdated traditions that discourage challenges to authority. Dinosaurs survive because too many of us have a fear, a reluctance and an apathy to not confront the old, weary and obtuse ways.

Let me be clear, I am not saying all our iconic, influential and idolised leaders are dinosaurs. There are many highly experienced leaders in our profession who are fully open to suggestions, comments and challenges, who are humble and honest, and who do not pretend to bring commandments down from on high, and it seems that these icons do not have an all-encompassing obsession with biomechanical analysis.

It is now time to end the era of the dinosaur, and to put a stop to the chaos and confusion they cause with their fast-fetched, poorly supported and improbable methods. The only way this will occur is if more of us move beyond fear and apathy, and are prepared to question and challenge them regularly, robustly but respectfully.

Twitter Follow Adam Meakins at @adammeakins

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