

Massage Therapists Need To Embrace Research

Research is a vital component for increasing the credibility of massage therapy as a viable complementary therapy.



Over the past 35 years, the field of massage therapy has transformed itself from a vocation into a profession. As a vocation, massage therapy was practiced by those who felt it was their calling. But these therapists had little in the way of advanced education to choose from, and few colleagues with whom to compare notes. Massage

therapy's transformation into a profession is based on the institutional development of four key arenas:

- Massage School Programmatic Accreditation—leading to higher standards of education.
- Practitioner National Certification—establishing an entry level of knowledge in order to protect the public,

and helping states grant licenses without each state undertaking the complexities of testing therapists.

- State Licensure—establishing government recognition, acknowledgment and regulation of a profession.
- Research—testing the validity of our beliefs about what massage does, by evaluating the effects of massage.

The number of massage and bodywork therapy schools in the United States has grown over the past 35 years from about a dozen licensed schools to more than 1,200. More than 80,000 practitioners currently hold national certification, and 33 states now grant licensure for massage therapy. Massage therapy has taken its place alongside other disciplines within the arenas of health care, sports, recreation and leisure. At the same time, therapists have maintained their individuality by choosing and creating a wide variety of subspecialties. Massage therapists are now working in hospitals, in corporate offices, airports and at disaster sites. The clients they treat include, but are not limited to, politicians, business leaders, sports figures, pregnant women, premature infants, those with mental illness, those in pain and those suffering from trauma.

Despite these accomplishments, the critical arena of research remains in

need of development in order for the profession of massage therapy to rest on solid ground. Indeed, as massage gains acceptance as therapy for a wide range of conditions, we have an increasing responsibility to rigorously test its effects, meeting the same standards of evidence as other, more traditional therapies.

We are beginning to see exciting activity. The Canadian Touch Research Center (CTRC) hosted the second annual International Symposium on the Science of Touch, which was held last spring in Montreal. At this meeting, researchers and massage therapists met and learned from each other.

We are beginning to see the Academic Health Centers for Integrative Medicine, funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), reach out to complementary and alternative medical (CAM) educational institutions to create partnerships. The Massage Therapy Research Consortium, a group of nine U.S. and Canadian massage schools, is working collaboratively to increase research capacity and foster partnerships with research scientists. Additionally, the Massage Therapy Foundation has maintained an active leadership role within the field, funding a variety of research-based studies.

To help further our profession's development in this arena, I have teamed up with Cynthia Piltch, a massage therapist and researcher who holds a Ph.D. in health policy, to bring you articles exploring the fundamentals of the research process. We want to discuss why massage therapists should be conversant with massage research, and how you as a practitioner may create or contribute to research projects. We hope not only to increase your working vocabulary and

knowledge in this arena, but also to make you aware of the exciting directions research is taking in our field.

Your clients are already reaping many benefits from massage therapy's growth into a profession. We encourage you to become well-informed in the arena of massage therapy research so that your present and future clients will benefit from the most up-to-date evidence-based knowledge about our field.

The Whys And Hows Of Increasing Research Literacy In Massage Therapists

Today, most massage therapists understand the value of meaningful research studies of massage therapy. Well-designed and implemented research can increase the credibility of massage as a valuable resource for alleviating stress and specific musculoskeletal pain, as well as for maintaining the public's general health and well-being. For instance, we have all benefited from the extensive research of Tiffany Field and her team of capable researchers at the Touch Research Institutes, and from studies conducted by the Harvard Medical School Division for Research and Education in Complementary and Integrative Medical Therapies, and the Osher Institute established by David

Eisenberg in Boston. Their preliminary research, and that of other institutions, strongly suggests the value of massage for treating a variety of health conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety, migraine headaches, acute back pain, immune function, fibromyalgia, chronic pain and premature birth) in a variety of different populations. Despite massage therapists' general appreciation of this research that supports the credibility of our profession, relatively few of us are well-versed in research language and methodology.

So why is research literacy important for every massage therapist? Because just as every massage therapist learns anatomy and physiology in an effort to understand how various massage techniques will affect the body, therapists also can benefit from understanding how research studies may potentially apply to their work with clients. In order for massage therapists to be informed consumers of research, schools of massage therapy and bodywork, as well as our professional organizations, need to offer introductory workshops and courses in research literacy. All massage therapists have a lot to gain by understanding the validity and meaning of particular studies, the implications for their

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massage practice and how to explain them to their clients when applicable. In addition, exposure to research methods will reinforce the importance of careful documentation of changes in a client's functioning and/or symptoms (e.g., increased mobility, decreased pain, changes in referred pain patterns, etc.) for assessing the potential impact of massage on the client's fitness and health.

Furthermore, as massage therapists we need to become major contributors toward establishing the direction of research in our field. Whatever research is undertaken will affect the credibility and standing of our profession for many years to come. Without our influence, scientists from outside the profession will establish and direct research in their areas of interest. By educating ourselves in the basics of the research process, we will be better able to influence the direction of research toward studies that will serve the best interests of our profession and the public.

It is no surprise that so few massage therapists are involved in doing research. At a glance, the disciplines appear to involve very different and sometimes contradictory skills and strengths. Massage therapists need to have strong kinesthetic and intuitive skills, while researchers require more scientific, analytical and written com-

munication skills. However, if we look below these surface differences, we find that both professions need strong analytic and evaluation skills in order to assess what needs to be done and to determine how well we have done it. For example, in order to be effective with a client over time, a massage therapist must develop a treatment plan with regular assessments built in. Massage therapists thereby get a sense of what techniques may help not only an individual client, but also other clients with similar issues. In research terms, the massage therapist formulates a hypothesis of what may help whom and why, and then tests that hypothesis to determine its validity. If the hypothesis proves faulty—that is, if the client does not achieve the expected outcome from the work—then the therapist adjusts the work, thereby generating and testing a new hypothesis.

What massage therapists do on an individual, client-by-client basis, researchers do on a larger scale. Developing, testing, adjusting and validating hypotheses are areas where massage therapists and researchers can effectively interface. Just as it is critical for massage therapists to have close and collegial relationships with the medical profession, it behooves us to do the same with the research community. Funding for massage research and other CAM therapies has grown dramatically over the last decade, and the massage profession needs to position itself to ensure that if those undertaking such research are not massage therapists themselves, they are partnering with well-informed massage therapists at each stage of their research.

Clearly, those few practitioners with joint massage and research training have the responsibility to help facilitate

respectful and productive partnerships of the two professions. In her most recent article, "Research Matters," in the May/June 2004 issue of *Massage Magazine*, Janet Kahn, Ph.D., does just that by highlighting the development of several activities being undertaken by the Massage Therapy Foundation geared toward promoting more massage research and greater research literacy among massage therapists. These activities include the development of:

- Research grants of up to \$20,000 for pilot studies that will provide necessary data for larger grant applications.
- An introductory research curriculum for massage therapy schools interested in offering research literacy courses to their students.
- A database of massage-related research (with 3,700 citations at present) to which massage therapists and researchers will have access.
- An annual contest for massage therapy students to submit clinical case studies for review. This contest is intended to give students practice in conducting their work and writing about it in a research-focused way.

In addition, the Massage Therapy Foundation is planning its first massage research conference in September 2005 in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The foundation's activities to date are important and commendable. They are likely to provide more opportunities for massage students to gain research literacy as part of their massage therapy training.

But what about massage therapists currently practicing? Some resources that may help these practitioners bridge the gap between massage therapy and research include the following:

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- Development of online and in-person research literacy classes that offer credits for certification renewal.
- Development of incentives by the foundation and other professional and funding entities to encourage partnerships, and perhaps mentorship programs, between research professionals and massage therapists, to expose massage therapists to both the rewards and the intricacies of research.
- Assessment by the foundation of the number of massage therapists interested in learning more about, and potentially conducting, research. This would be followed by design of a plan for facilitating such development—a training fellowship, for example.
- Convening of periodic meetings/conferences on research and related topics, with recognized leaders in the field as faculty and advisors.

In summary, the massage therapy profession is at a critical crossroad in its relationship to research literacy. Not every massage therapist wants to be a researcher. However, we will all gain substantial individual and collective power and legitimacy when massage therapists gain research literacy in conjunction with improved access to the best research opportunities and information our profession has to offer. ☐



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Cynthia Piltch, Ph.D., is a massage therapist, reiki master teacher and consultant on research methodology, stress management and wellness. She has taught research literacy workshops in academic and community settings in the Boston area and is currently a member of the Massage Therapy Foundation's Student Contest Review Committee. In addition, she teaches in the Continuing Education Department of the Muscular Therapy Institute and is an adjunct faculty member of the Northeastern School of Nursing and Tufts Medical School. She can be reached at: capiltch@aol.com.