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## **A Trade or Profession?**

By Ralph Stephens, BS, LMT, NCTMB

There it was: a *CBS MarketWatch* story raving about how the stock of trade schools (career colleges) rose dramatically in 2003. The article listed the "10 hottest fields," and guess what? Massage therapy is the top training program being added to trade schools.

Hey colleagues, we're number one - in trade schools - which brings us to the question: "Is the practice of massage therapy a trade or a profession?"

While many of us have always considered it a profession, massage is being increasingly taught as a trade. Let's look at what the dictionary\* has to say about this:

**Trade:** Somebody's particular occupation, especially one that involves a skill; the people who work in a particular area of business or industry.

**Profession:** An occupation that requires extensive education or specialized training; the members of a particular profession.

The practice of massage involves skill and it can be an occupation, so it clearly meets the definition of a trade. A profession requires extensive education or specialized training. Massage education involves specialized training, but is it extensive? Certainly not at the entry level, and therein lies the problem.

Extensive education is available for those who desire it. There are schools out there that offer more than the minimum requirements to get licensed or pass the National Certification Exam; however, they are few and far between. In most areas, extensive training is only available through advanced continuing-education programs.

Currently, a group of school owners in Florida feels there is no need to increase the educational requirements, so long as the massage therapists cause no harm to the public. It is sad that this group believes

our standards of professional training involve teaching students just enough to not harm the public. While that's better than what can be said about many allopathic practitioners (who inflict a lot of harm and bury their mistakes), it sells massage-therapy education short. Why can't we set standards high enough to teach students to do more than not harm the public?

I agree with the argument that more hours for the sake of more hours is not an improvement; 1,000 hours of lousy education is worse than 500 hours of lousy education. Merely raising the entry-level hour requirement will not improve the quality of massage education or the competency of graduates. The root of the problem lies with the low quality of the hours offered. How can we improve massage education and shut down poor-quality schools? (Not necessarily small schools - there are many excellent small schools.)

Massage therapy and bodywork is spiraling down from the fastest emerging new health care profession to a trade because of a lack of enforceable educational standards. What stands in the way? MONEY. Massage schools are a huge part of the massage industry and sit on a raging river of money. School owners and associations need the continuous flow of new students and members. They both see financial disincentives if the entry-level bar is raised, so they resist such attempts. Short, inadequate programs ensure a high dropout rate from the expanding profession, which maintains the demand for new students and graduates.

The low-entry bar, unenforceable educational standards, high dropout rates, and the way massage is currently taught as a trade from "school-in-a-box-curriculums" will slowly drag our profession down from first-door health care providers to tradespeople in relaxation spas and physical therapy departments, working for slightly above minimum wage. While some schools lead by example with excellent programs and superb instructors, others prey on students - often on many levels. What can be done at this point? It is difficult to get in the way of a river of money. It will usually sweep you away or drown you. It is this cash flow that chains us to the status quo of lousy schools. Many of us have searched in vain for effective solutions, and the only organization that has tried to place high standards on massage schools didn't cover its bases and may be sued out of existence.

In the February issue, Cliff Korn talked about "Appreciative Inquiry" - a system of finding the positive and then working to create more of it ([www.massagetoday.com/archives/2004/02/11.html](http://www.massagetoday.com/archives/2004/02/11.html)). Now, I really like that! I have written previously in this column that you get what you concentrate on. It should be obvious that if you concentrate on eliminating sickness, poverty, cancer, drugs, or anything else, the results are always more of what you don't want. The mind is the creator, and you manifest what you concentrate on. Look

around. How successful have the "wars" on poverty, cancer and drugs been? There is more poverty, cancer and drugs than ever. How well has the allopathic medical system - with its entire focus on sickness - done at reducing sickness? It has failed miserably. There is more sickness than ever. (Sorry, but sanitation and hygiene have reduced sickness - not allopathic procedures!)

Those of us who care about education have to change our focus. If we keep focusing on the lousy, "just-do-no-harm" mindset, all we will get is more of the lousy. We need to stop concentrating on lousy schools and the problems they cause. We have to find and focus on the positive and the excellent in massage education. We have to hold up the great schools as models, and steer potential therapists toward them. We have to find the greatness, and work to make it the norm. We cannot fight the current cash-flow-based education system in the trade of massage, but we can begin to create a new channel for cash to flow toward professional excellence. This will build the profession toward being the premier wellness modality in health care.

It is a bold, daring concept to work toward excellence in a culture that holds the likes of Homer and Bart Simpson as its role models, and works to suppress excellence and achievement in the name of "fairness." Remember, life is not fair. Fair is for underachievers; Fair is somewhere between average and poor, and that is not good enough for the health care of our fellow man.

To my colleagues who care about what's left of the massage therapy profession, let's begin thinking about what is excellent in massage education. Let's focus on making high standards the rule, not the exception. We will not fail to bring about what we concentrate on. It's time to start working to implement this concept of Appreciative Inquiry. As one of my teachers told me, "Keep your eye on the donut, not the hole."

\*MicroSoft Word 2001 Dictionary

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Click [here](#) for more information about Ralph Stephens, BS, LMT, NCTMB.



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