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Beyond the Rub

By Ralph Stephens, BS, LMT, NCTMB

It is time to put heart back into massage. When I started the series of columns on failing massage education, I first documented the failing, then proposed several suggestions I believe could improve massage education.

Most of my suggestions involved imposing additional government regulation on the profession in general, and on massage schools in particular. This is probably necessary in the short run. However, government is always the worst way to do anything except maybe to fight wars and collect taxes. Texas massage therapist David Lauterstein, RMT, says it well:

More government oversight will not eliminate problems. Often, trying to regulate the lowest common denominator mostly penalizes the good schools, that don't need government to tell them to be responsible, with needless regulations, curriculum restrictions, extra forms to fill out, etc. And the greater government involvement contaminates the schools with government's monstrous lack of imagination.

Once government establishes a minimum, that minimum also becomes the maximum. Why do more than you have to? While a few will strive for excellence, most will attempt to barely meet the minimum standard. I have observed several states before and after licensing. Before licensing, there were one or two good schools and one or two lousy schools. A few years after licensing, there were one or two good schools and dozens of lousy schools. Is this the desired result? I hope not!

It finally dawned on me that what has been lost in all the clamor is heart. The heart of massage is being lost. Massage has the potential to be the premier wellness modality in health care. Wholism is the birthright of American massage therapy (as well as being just "good science.") The current medical emphasis in massage, and the emphasis on energy work freed of any logical constraints, seems a great loss in so many respects.

Both paradigms sell the potential of massage/bodywork short. Most energy work has such little grounding in the physical sciences that it achieves no consistent results beyond the parasympathetic response of laying down in a calm environment for awhile. The medical emphasis usually focuses on nothing more than "rub here for this and there for that." It is usually taught with emphasis on insurance billing (drooling for dollars) and acceptance by the gods of the sickness sciences. Neither have much heart or wholism.

If we focus on sickness, we will have more and more sickness. That is the way the universe works. The allopathic sickness system has not lessened the amount of sickness by studying it. In fact, it has increased sickness, irregardless what it may have done for lifespan. The focus needs to be put on wellness. Until we study wellness with the fervor we study sickness, we will never achieve wellness. Since there is more money to be made treating sickness than in curing it, wellness will never be a priority in the allopathic system.

The same is true for massage education. If we put our focus on its failures, we will have more and more failure. If we concentrate on low quality, we will achieve it. If we study incompetence, we will have more and more incompetence. It is time to put our focus on excellence. Right now our emphasis is on competence. Competence is a lowest common denominator process. Our current system of regulation and national certification is a lowest common denominator standard. The results show it is not working. It is time to focus on and strive for excellence. David Lauterstein again puts this so well:

Let's promote educational excellence, rather than trying to eliminate incompetence. Just as in massage, we can focus on the ultimate goal of promoting health, rather than just "treating" the problem. We need to have a definition of educational excellence (certainly not just competence). I always say if a client comes out of a massage session with me and I ask how it was and they say, "competent," I would consider that unfortunate. I want "great!" The same holds true for the goals of education. If we teach in the spirit with which we massage, education will be life-changing: full of heart, thoughtful, physically graceful and spiritually transformational. This means that we must recommit as a profession to explaining and regenerating what health is, what healing is, what does wholistic mean and how it is not a new age ideology, but rather an important and more scientific way of looking at health.

Systems-thinking rather than medical-reductionism is so important.

Greg Lawton, DC, of the American Medical Massage Association (AMMA), puts it another way:

Most people don't realize that education is not the event of me teaching you, it is the process of your taking initiative for learning. The teacher, the school is just a resource. The teacher's role is to motivate and guide. The student's role is to search and investigate, and to thereby discover truth and knowledge for themselves. If I could change education in massage and health care, I would attempt to instill a recognition among therapists of the essential spiritual nature of mankind, and I would attempt to assist students in the development of their professional, and human, capacities to care for humanity as healers, and doctors of true healthcare. This is what I think holistic health care education is all about. The word *doctor* means "teacher," and whether teaching in a classroom or a treatment room, the essential purpose and focus is the same: to uplift the human spirit through truth. Truth about our health, and truth about our purpose in life, as massage therapists and as healers.

To me, all this comes back to heart. If you are truly working from the heart, you will, out of love and compassion for your fellow human beings do the absolute best you can. You will never be satisfied with your level of knowledge and skill. Just learning to rub will not be enough. Just teaching others to rub will not be enough. Your desire to help others will drive you to study both the physical and the non-physical sciences. It will lead you to study holistic health. It will drive you to practice the principles of holistic health in your own life, so you can be an inspiring and motivational example to others, especially your patients and students. Heart will guide you to strive for excellence. It will not stand for incompetence or even just competence, either in yourself or the profession.

We need a lot more heart in massage education if we ever hope to move beyond the rub.

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



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