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Directions in Massage Therapy

By Cliff Korn, BS, LMT, NCTMB

Our profession is changing daily. In the past 10 years, it has entered the light of day and joined the mainstream. Massage therapists are now high on the list of caregivers in many circles of the country: wealthy and poor; white and blue collar; young and old; male and female.

The change to which I am referring, however, is not a change in acceptance, but a change in precision and refinement.

Specifically, I have seen a transformation from gross motor techniques to more subtle, specific techniques.

This was made even more evident to me while attending the recent "Beyond the Dura" Research Conference (see front-page article). CranioSacral Therapy (CST) and other light-touch therapies are proving their efficacy in research studies and are being utilized by an increasing number of therapists. I find it interesting that more than half of the students taking CST are massage therapists. This statistic amazed me, in part because CST is one of a handful of techniques that have a purpose beyond the realm of "relaxation": it treats conditions.

Those familiar with CST know the premise of the technique: It only takes five grams of force (the weight of a nickel) to effect significant change. The research conference included presentations of clinical data collected in the treatment of widespread issues, ranging from pediatric feeding dysfunction, breastfeeding problems and pelvic floor rehabilitation, to preparing Egyptian conjoined twins for separation surgery. The fact that this technique-which developed out of osteopathy-is taught to massage therapists on equal footing with physicians, PTs, OTs and other allied health professionals says a lot about our capabilities. The large numbers of MTs utilizing techniques such as CST may be one reason I see an industry trend toward more gentle touch.

I used to believe gentle touch could not be anything more than "soothing": useful for comfort and to ease emotional discomfort, but of little value to alleviate chronic physical dysfunction and discomfort. My mind was opened to another perspective when I experienced effective sessions that integrated energy techniques and light touch.

I recently had the privilege of participating in a fresh-tissue CranioSacral Dissection workshop, in which I got to palpate the falx cerebri (cranial membrane) and monitor changes as the instructor applied light manual pressure to the sacrum. I also was honored to participate in a study that measured the manual force required to palpate change. Almost all of the study participants could palpate change in tension of the falx cerebri with measured forces between three and 35 grams. This is good enough for me to believe that light touch can certainly be effective.

Massage therapists also regularly integrate reiki, aspects of polarity therapy and other energetic techniques into their practices, lightening the overall average force used in sessions. In my own practice, I find integration is important because I need to get the attention of some of my clients before progress can begin. The comfort and security of certain deep-pressure techniques and confident touch moves my clients to a relaxed, trusting place where the more subtle techniques can be effective. The client who has learned to accept the more aggressive techniques in our toolboxes is, in my opinion, capable of experiencing a variety of light-touch procedures. My Rolfing friends inform me that they, too, are lightening the forces they use and are losing their reputation as providers of "therapeutic discomfort."

Now, please don't think I'm saying only light-touch techniques are indicated for professional massage therapists! I'm not saying that at all. I am a firm believer in the efficacy of techniques, such as trigger point, cross-fiber friction, assisted stretching, etc., though they are not always comfortable to the client. I also am an advocate of the more subtle directions I have discussed in this article.

Ten years ago, I saw (and experienced) a lot of poking, prodding and elbow use. I now see skilled palpation and use of forearms to obtain a more comfortable myofascial modification. I think it's a trend. I hope so!

Thanks for listening!

Massage Today encourages letters to the editor to discuss matters relating to the publication's content. Letters may be published in a future issue of *Massage Today*.

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