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## **Educational Excellence**

By Cliff Korn, BS, LMT, NCTMB

Much is being written these days about the need for quality massage education. *Massage Today* columnist Ralph Stephens wrote an entire series of articles on the topic. (*Editor's note:* See Ralph's five-part series, "[Massage Education Failing](#)." Other massage and bodywork publications also are covering educational issues, and it is a frequent topic on massage and bodywork internet chat rooms.

Most of the press laments the mediocrity of available educational opportunities. I hope to talk a little bit about some exceptional education I recently encountered, and how sad it made me to realize that mediocrity still exists.

In a related note, I just received a *Federal Register* notice requesting third-party comments on the National Accrediting Commission of Cosmetology Arts and Sciences (NACCAS) expansion of scope to include massage therapy educational programs and institutions. This expansion would allow institutions accredited by NACCAS to offer massage therapy programs, based on educational standards identified by the cosmetology profession, rather than the massage therapy profession. This development could change the view that massage therapy is in control of its destiny, especially with the Department of Education. I also question its effect on the future of excellence in massage education. If approved, one certain outcome would be massage therapy being taught by non-massage therapists. I don't think cosmetologists should be teaching people how to be massage therapists, any more than massage therapists should be teaching people how to become cosmetologists. I am all for ubiquitous accreditation of massage schools. I think it would solve a multitude of sins, including easing the job of massage therapy regulation and reverting national certification to the voluntary credential it was designed to provide. However, I do think massage school accreditation should have a programmatic theme, with massage therapy taught by massage therapists as a core requirement.

I attended a convention recently that provided continuing education opportunities for attendees. As I am a frequent convention participant, this is nothing new to me. I usually search the convention brochures for topics that interest me and hope to glean useful tidbits of knowledge. This time, I chose differently. I chose the workshops based upon the presenters, not the topics. I wanted to experience presenters I knew to be superb, or who had been touted as being the "best of the best." I ended up in four different workshops, each offering three CEUs. I chose *The Pregnant Pelvis* by Carole Osborn-Sheets; *The ABCs of Meeting with Physicians* by David Kent; *From Ringworm to Eczema: What is That?* by Ruth Werner; and one other that I will describe shortly. I usually avoid three-credit-hour classes, because they tend to be "teasers" for more in-depth classes, but with these four, I was not disappointed! All the presenters were excellent, and the workshops were robust with useful knowledge.

The fourth workshop in particular spurred my thoughts to write this column. I participated in *Cancer and Massage: The Real Issues*, taught by Tracy Walton and Gayle MacDonald. The material was well-prepared and skillfully presented. The course handouts were scholarly works in and of themselves. The workshop dealt in considerable depth into the pathophysiology of cancers, and stressed modifications to massage procedures involving site; position; speed; scheduling; stroke; pressure; duration; rhythm; lubricant; and environment. In clear, concise terms, the presenters stressed the importance of investigating the side-effects and complications of common cancer treatments before proceeding, and reasoning through the possible beneficial and harmful effects of techniques on clients' conditions. They illustrated information trees to help in gathering information using a logical progression, and suggested ways to fill in information gaps. They also focused specifically on lymphedema and lymphedema cautions, and provided examples of communication and health history forms specific to cancer patients. The instructors' thorough preparation and presentation enabled them to offer huge amounts of important information in a short amount of time. It was obvious that individuals with cancer experience safe, effective massage on Walton's and MacDonald's tables. Other class participants shared some of the reasons that safety through knowledge was important. One indicated that while working under the direction of a chiropractor, he was instructed to work more aggressively on a client's shoulder and now felt guilty because the work had spurred the onset of lymphedema. Another said he would never again work on a client with cancer, as he felt inadequately educated to take on that responsibility after having a previous client die hours after leaving his table; he wondered if he was partially responsible.

Whether you've been in practice for years, or only a month, you probably have countless stories of clients who either forgot to share pieces of information with you, or outright lied on intake forms. Many of us have experienced the client who checked all the "no" boxes on our forms and then presented with the unmentioned sternum-to-groin zigzag scar! I think we need to expand our knowledge base to pick up on health history gaps quicker, so we harm fewer of our clients. Scars are easy because we can see them . . . potential complications/considerations below the surface pose a more difficult challenge.

As a friend and I left the workshop, we discussed at length the impact and importance of high-quality education such as we had just enjoyed. As is the case with many of our peers, we both entered the field when work on cancer patients was contraindicated. My friend is a knowledgeable and skilled educator himself, so I was particularly interested in his thoughts and opinions. We came to the conclusion that basic massage education in America is sorely lacking, and that all massage therapists should access to the information we had just received, in the interest of safety and concern for our clients' well-being. So many people desperately need educated and compassionate touch to facilitate their healing. My friend was truly disturbed that he lacked the time to revamp all the curricula he currently taught, to incorporate higher levels of pathology awareness. I think we all need to experience excellence so we can better identify the mediocre. I think we need to demand more from our continuing education programs, and encourage those entering the field to demand more from the schools that populate our profession. Education excellence should not be every massage therapist's expectation, but every massage therapist's right! Much of the public thinks we have it now. As *Star Trek* Captain Jean Luc Picard says so aptly, "Make it so."

Thanks for listening!

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