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Massage Education Failing, Part III

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Editor's note: Part I of this article appeared in the March 2002 issue; part II appeared in the April 2002 issue.

In my last two columns, I have pointed out the downward spiral occurring in the education side of our profession.

This discussion was inspired by the results of a poll that showed over 50% of practicing therapists felt they had received substandard education, ranking their education as "fair to poor." In the first column, I discussed the overall problem of incompetent schools. Last month, I explained how the National Certification Exam for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork is part of the problem and is incapable of being part of the solution in its current form. This is based on the fact that the knowledge base it tests is determined by a survey of the profession. As the profession expands with more and more poorly trained therapists, the survey will bring back data from a "dumbed-down" profession. This will continually reduce the level of material covered on the exam to the lowest common denominator of an ever-less-educated profession.

I have also explained that research will not help elevate a profession that is incapable of reproducing the results found by the research.

It was brought to my attention that we need to offer suggestions when pointing out problems. Those suggestions will come in future columns. Before a solution can be created, the problem must be clearly understood. The options for a solution must also be understood. It should be clear that the current national certification process is part of the problem and offers no way out. Research will not help at this point, either.

The problem is bigger than just the education of our profession. The massage/bodywork community has become the landing site for every new-age idea to come down the pike. Esoteric and fringe massage

techniques seem to be a safe port of harbor for poorly trained instructors and practitioners who lack a solid educational foundation in the basic sciences and manual therapies. In its attempt to accept everyone, every theory, every technique and every practice, the massage community and its "mis-leaders" have failed to clearly define itself and set clear standards for education and licensure for massage therapy. Due to this failure, the profession has been unable to achieve the recognition and credibility massage/bodywork deserves as a health care profession. By lacking boundaries and by trying to be the campground for every group, cult, mystic, shaman and personality whose ego requires a special name for their version of the same strokes, we have reached a point where we have no idea what we do or who we are, and neither does the public or the health care profession.

The blame for this can be placed squarely at the feet of the associations and pseudo-associations of this profession. The pseudo-associations are not associations at all, but for-profit corporations who are nothing more than mail-order vendors of insurance and meaningless credentials. The only significant, valid professional association has repeatedly backed away from setting meaningful standards, definitions and legislation because it might exclude someone and lose some checkbook members.

Both types have been largely controlled by a few individuals who have recognized and taken advantage of the extremely high level of practice failure in new massage graduates especially, among the twenty something generation. This failure rate has created an opportunity for schools and associations that prey on the constant influx of new students -- about 50,000 per year. With this constant turnover, the "leaders" pretty much run the show the way they want. Any standard that would in any way restrict entry into the profession, even if it improved the quality of the profession and the care received by the public, is a threat to the "leaders" cash flow. Naturally, they resist standardized licensing and the setting of any other meaningful standards. There will be no help from the insurance vendors. In fact, they will fight every effort to improve the situation. The only hope for help from the true association is that it is possible for concerned, "new blood" to become actively involved and change the direction currently being followed.

So, what about government regulation? Is it a solution, or another part of the problem? Think about it. The only excellence you'll find in our government is in its military and propaganda systems. The rest of the time, government is inept, inefficient, and another lowest-common-denominator system. The departments of education do little regarding enforcement of standards at postsecondary schools, especially "trade schools." They do not have the staff to monitor the hundreds of schools in each state for compliance. They respond only to complaints, and then usually are unable to do much. Why? Because it usually becomes the school's

word against the student's. Our regulatory boards (licensing boards) are in the same position. They are not set up to monitor schools and often do not have any authority over schools other than to approve a submitted curriculum. As I mentioned in the March column, anyone can get a curriculum approved, because even if they are totally incompetent, the state board must help them until they get the forms right, and then must approve them. If standards were set higher, regulatory/licensing boards would just have to help more.

Regulation will have to be part of the solution eventually. However, it will have to be done skillfully, so as not to burden the good schools to the point of extinction. That result would leave only community colleges and general business schools, whose primary concern is their automechanic and cosmetology programs.

To the people that I now have hopping mad, remember: Our profession's education system is failing, and you know it. Do not direct your anger at me for being the one to say so. Don't shoot the messenger. Direct your energies toward a constructive solution that will do the most to help humanity. Change is often painful and growth is often difficult. However, if we as a profession do not do something soon to rescue our failing education system, we may be faced with the possible loss of the ability to practice that which we love.

Next month, I will share more massage education horror stories and begin presenting suggestions for change.

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



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