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Massage Education Failing, Part IV

By Ralph Stephens, BS, LMT, NCTMB

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

When I started this series of columns on education, I knew there was a huge problem in the education sector of our profession.

I had no idea how bad it really is. I get more horror stories every week. Just like the Standard American Diet, it is S.A.D.

Before I share some of the best of the worst, I need to issue a correction to a statement I made in the April column. I stated that the National Certification Exam for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork had a pass rate of over 90%. While true at one time, in 2001 the pass rate for first-time test-takers was 78%. This is either movement in the right direction on the part of the exam, or the reflection of more inadequately trained massage school graduates sitting for the exam. It's probably some of both. I apologize for my factual error and will be more careful in the future. I stand by my other comments on the exam, including my support for it.

Our overall education system in this country is in a bureaucratic mess. Postsecondary schools cannot refuse to enroll anyone, for fear of being sued for discrimination or violating the Americans with Disabilities Act. They often cannot fail any student because, in some states, the student can go to the Proprietary School Board and file a grievance. In some states, it seems that failing grades and absenteeism are not sufficient grounds to deny someone their "right" to graduate. Schools must let anyone in and everyone out. How can we have any kind of quality education system when the government deliberately thwarts schools setting any kind of standard for entry and graduation?

One large trade school with campuses in several states teaches its massage program from videos. Instructors are only room monitors. The instructor is never allowed to touch a student for any reason. How can students learn quality touch when they have never experienced it? This is an accredited school that offers up to a two-year degree. So much for the two-year degree becoming a meaningful standard.

Another school is reported to have a staff of five recruiters and only two instructors.

Students have dropped out of massage school and opened their own schools. Now their students are dropping out and opening more schools. The downward spiral continues.

These are not the worst stories. The worse cases are too embarrassing to put out on public display. Hopefully enough of you care about this situation to do something about it. Changes must be wrought by concerned groups of therapists and educators at the state level. It would be nice to have some national leadership, but there is none in sight at this time -- so think global and act local.

What can be done? The challenge is to create change that improves or eliminates poor schools without punishing the good schools. Big does not mean good. There are lots of really excellent programs that are small.

Several important steps can be implemented without punishing good schools. These are prerequisites, standards for instructors and teaching assistants, and student tracking of programs. These can be implemented through statute or administrative rule by massage boards in licensed states, by proprietary school boards and by departments of education. It will take a lot of prodding by advocates. There will be much resistance by many schools and associations who do not want the cash flow disturbed.

Prerequisites for Acceptance into Massage School

Currently, a student can graduate from high school with straight Ds and sign up for massage school. The school slides them through and another incompetent therapist hits the streets, treating the public to substandard massage, driving the public away from our profession. I propose that before being allowed to enroll in a massage/bodywork training program, the potential student must complete at least two years of postsecondary education (college) with a grade point average of 2.75. Included in that training should be at least one semester of anatomy, one semester of physiology, one semester of marketing/advertising and one semester of basic business accounting. Every other health care profession has educational prerequisites. Most require at least a BA or a BS. I am not suggesting a degree be obtained, just successful educational

experience equaling four semesters of full-time student status.

Instructor and Teaching Assistant Credentials

If an instructor cannot make a living doing massage they should not be teaching it. It is time to require instructors in massage schools to have either three years of successful practice, or one year of successful practice and formal teaching credentials. After three years of practice, they may become full-time instructors and would not be required to maintain a practice. These standards would not be necessary for instructors teaching anatomy, business marketing, etc; however, they should have appropriate credentials in the subject taught. To be a teaching assistant, individuals should have at least one year of successful practice. What is successful practice? I will let you argue that one out among yourselves. Regardless, something has to be done to stop massage schools from hiring their failures and making them instructors.

Student Tracking of Massage Programs

All students enrolled in a massage training program should be required to keep daily diaries of the instruction they receive, documenting every hour of time spent (both subjects and instructor(s)). A well-kept diary is great evidence to prove a school did or did not provide the advertised or required program. This will allow regulators to efficiently identify deficient schools. The record should be kept by individual students and never be in the possession of the school. This simple step alone will shape up or eliminate most inadequate schools. It won't improve quality, but it will improve compliance with standards and with the advertised program.

Chew on those ideas. Talk among yourselves. Begin to take action as you see fit. I'm out of space again. Next month, I'll discuss accreditation, school mentoring and more. Strive for excellence -- it is attainable!

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



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