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No Danger Here?

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Massage education is still failing. There are, of course, great massage schools and continuing education programs out there; they are not the subjects of this article. Unfortunately, the number of poor programs and providers overshadows the good ones.

While every profession has its outstanding and average schools, nowhere is the spectrum from best to worst as wide as in the massage profession. It's embarrassing and disgraceful. Why do we tolerate it? This profession has backed away from educational standards many times. It seems, for the most part, we educate "down" to a price, never "up" to a standard. It is amazing that when higher educational standards are proposed, the greatest outcry comes from school owners. Their complaints are understandable when the standards would penalize good schools with bureaucracy and paperwork (without effectively weeding out or improving poor schools). Proposals of this nature should be rejected; however, the profession and its best educators should embrace standards that would weed out poor programs and allow good programs to do a better job. Unfortunately, they often do not.

At one time, the AMTA had a 1,000-hour standard, but hardly any of its approved schools (at the time) actually provided 1,000 hours of education. When this was discovered, rather than enforce the 1,000-hour standard, AMTA deferred to school owners and lowered the standard to 500 hours. A huge opportunity was lost. More recently, COMTA, the only massage accreditation agency that has, in my opinion, any credibility, conducted a survey of educators and schools. The survey results established guidelines that would provide quality, competency-based massage education programs. Still, the very schools that submitted survey data later protested the results, claiming the new proposed program was too long. To prevent mutiny, the proposed hours were scaled back. Another huge opportunity was lost.

Last month, *Massage Today* ran a story that the "mean ole' Florida Board of Massage Therapy (FBMT)" tried to raise the required hours for massage education programs in Florida

(www.massagetoday.com/archives/2003/10/02.html). But FLAME, a group of massage schools, fought it. What was FLAME's argument? "The purpose of the FBMT is to protect the public. The FDOE [Florida Department of Education] could not show that massage therapists graduating from a 500-hour program were a danger to the public." Is this what our standards, or lack thereof, should be based on? Some influential school owners evidently believe that their programs are successful if they train future massage therapists just enough that they are not a danger to the public. It doesn't matter if students are taught to do any good or help the public; competency or having skills to be a successful health care provider are not important. What is important is to simply not be a danger to the public. Is this something to be proud of?

Things could be worse. We're ahead of the allopaths (MDs, hospitals, pharmacies, etc.). In the U.S., they get away with killing over 250,000 people a year (by their own figures), and no one seems to care. That is really dangerous - more dangerous than drunk drivers or wars, which people seem to care about. Allopaths go to school for a long time. Maybe the massage school owners are on to something: just provide enough training to not be dangerous. Perhaps running students through programs that leave them unable to succeed (thus ensuring a huge dropout rate from the profession) is the way to go. The market will never become saturated with therapists, and the schools will always have a demand to fulfill. The few students with drive and motivation will acquire post-school training and do well. The public will not be in any danger. It's nirvana. I guess we should be proud. NOT!

The latest insult to massage education is a group of school owners who have decided that going through a real accreditation process is too much of a hassle. After all, who knows what a school should have to do or teach other than its owner? This group claims to have created an accreditation process that virtually any school can complete over the phone in 30 to 45 days. Great! Another for-profit organization selling accreditations! Do you know of a profession, especially a health care profession other than massage therapy where this happens? Their name will not be mentioned, as I do not want to give them the free publicity. Shame on you all who participate in this or other mail-order accreditation. It is nothing to be proud of - it is just short of being consumer fraud.

Some time ago a Texas therapist wrote to me. At the time I thought it was a bit extreme, but now I am beginning to believe he is onto something: "We must recognize that schools are part of the massage industry, but not part of the massage profession. It is up to practicing professionals to demand educational standards and not leave educational quality up to the schools. It is up to the schools to meet the demands of the profession, not dictate where the profession should go."

The danger is, if we do not clean up our educational act pretty soon, there may be a backlash against our profession that will greatly impede our ability to help people. Research is proving the benefits of massage, but the typical therapist can't understand a research study, much less duplicate the technique. The public expects the results proven in studies, but seldom finds it. Physicians refer to massage therapists based on research results, and the patient comes back with stories of shamanism and incense - probably not harmed, but probably not helped, either. It is time to end the idea that just "not being dangerous" is good enough. Let's continue to do no harm, while putting emphasis on higher educational standards that better train therapists to maximize the potential benefits massage therapy can provide for the good of humanity.

The holiday season begins this month. Get out and shop until you drop; the economy needs your help. I hope you sell more gift certificates than you printed; however, try to keep in mind that the real reason for these holidays is not material but spiritual.

May your holidays be joyous, healthy and filled with the true spirit of the season.

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



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