



*Massage Today*

April, 2004, Vol. 04, Issue 04

## **Pondering Professionalism**

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

"If all we are interested in is technical competence, then we have become a trade school. If technical competence exists but not the necessary attitudes, values, and behaviors of the professional, then our graduates may wear the trappings of that profession, but would no longer be a representative of the profession."<sup>3</sup>

Professionalism seems to be a term that gets mentioned a lot and explored little.

Searching the Internet for the keywords "massage and professionalism," I came across an AMTA Web page that stated, "professionalism in the field of massage therapy has been greatly elevated in the last 10 years," and an Oregon Massage Therapists Association page proclaiming that a purpose of the association was "to support and develop massage professionalism." Both pages assume that we know exactly what was professionalism is. Do we?

Perhaps the most common perception of professionalism is an ongoing commitment to learning and improving skills.<sup>1,2,5</sup> Some feel that continuing education should be forced upon a profession's members. Tan notes, however, that for physicians, the minimal results of such forced learning have been sobering.<sup>8</sup>

He believes a far better approach than coercion is to instill the curiosity of discovery, encouraging members to be seekers of knowledge rather than rote learners or copiers of lecture notes: "Ah, we see a servant's heart and the motivation to serve. Motivation is not exactly the same as incentive. Motivation comes from within, and innate drive. It is a humane value, whereas incentives are social constructs or individually valued rewards for desired behavior."<sup>8</sup>

Believing professionalism stems solely from learning and certification can become a recipe for idolizing the trappings and missing the essence. Striving for training and occupational regulation is not equivalent to creating professionalism. Law, medicine and pharmacology seem to worry that their professionalism is

being undercut.<sup>3,4,8</sup> However, there is no evidence that their levels of technical education or occupational regulation are waning.

Professionalism, I believe, is less about what we require externally from those entering the profession, and more about what we evoke within their hearts. The commercialism of what we offer needs to be balanced by the spirits of service, collegiality, pride, independence, leadership, and integrity.<sup>7</sup> Commitment is much easier to inspire by offering a challenging example than it is to force by rules and regulations.

According to Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, "Personal relationships lie at the heart of the work. Even in the face of the vast technological advances of the information age, the human dimension remains constant, and these professional obligations will endure. ... A business can focus only on profits. A profession cannot. It must focus first on the community it is supposed to serve."<sup>4</sup>

As professionals, we are accountable for our actions and communication. There is a wide consensus that civility and altruism are corner stones of professionalism. Within any profession there are differences in background and perspective. Offering each other civility and respect rather than elitism and disdain are indicators of professionalism. Be quick to offer a helping hand to less advanced colleagues and equally be slow to undermine a colleague's position by an inappropriate remark or document. Justice O'Connor strongly believes that even within the conflicts of law, one can "disagree without being disagreeable."<sup>4</sup> Our tasks of civility within massage are simpler. Our attitudes should be kept congruent with our healing goals of touch.

As professionals, we have a fiduciary relationship with clients, and an obligation of trust and compassionate concern for the client's welfare that takes priority over other concerns. Roscoe Pound, Dean of the Harvard Law School from 1916-1936, perhaps framed this best. If we strive toward professionalism, we could do far worse than to heed his words: "[W]hat we mean by the term profession when we speak of the old recognized professions (medicine, the law, ministry). We mean an organized calling in which men pursue a learned art and are united in the pursuit of it as a public service. As I have said, no less a public service because they may make a livelihood thereby. Here, from the professional standpoint there are three essential ideas: organization, learning, and a spirit of public service. The gaining of a livelihood is not a professional consideration. Indeed, the professional spirit, the spirit of a public service, constantly curbs the urge of that instinct."<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, "The term [professionalism] refers to a group...pursuing a learned art as a common calling in the spirit of public service - no less a public service because it may incidentally be a means of livelihood. Pursuit of the learned art in the spirit of public service is the primary purpose."<sup>7</sup>

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