



Massage Today

April, 2002, Vol. 02, Issue 04

Scope (Not the Mouthwash)

By Cliff Korn, BS, LMT, NCTMB

"Scope of Practice" is a term that, like many others, seems obvious, but means different things to different people. Strictly speaking, a scope of practice is the legal limit of practice options available to a regulated practitioner.

However, in common usage, associations develop scope-of-practice guidelines for professionals in a field independent of regulation. A practitioner's scope of practice is predominantly measured by definition, and definitions change depending on who is doing the defining. Laypersons and regulators may define terms we use internal to our work differently than we do.

An example of this can be found with the term "massotherapy." From a school website comes this definition: "Massotherapy is a scientific method for treating disorders of the human body through manipulating the soft tissue, by hand or other modality, to affect relaxation, relieve pain, increase range and mobility of joints and ligaments, reduce certain types of edemas, affect blood and nutrition, improve metabolism, promote circulation, and beneficially influence the nervous system." Another school's site defines the same term as: "Massotherapy is a hands-on application that consists of a number of techniques executed on living tissue with the objective of promoting a general well-being. This type of therapy has an effect on the skin, muscles, tendons and ligaments (referred to sometimes as soft tissue) and aims for a physical as well as a psychic well-being since the last two are closely related." Yet a third defines it as the following: "Massotherapy is massage therapy or a systematic and scientific manipulation of the soft tissues of the body."

They all make the term seem pretty synonymous with "massage," don't they? My favorite choice for definitions is *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, Fourth Edition. My copy defines massotherapy as "a physical therapy by means of massage." My guess is that individuals looking to initiate state regulation/licensing of massage would get fewer objections from the physical therapists if they studiously

avoided *Webster's* definition!

Individual state regulators can and do choose how they wish to define terms and scopes of practice. This can drastically affect a scope of practice from one jurisdiction to another. A classic example of this is colon hydrotherapy, which until recently was (in one state) not allowed in a licensed massage establishment, while in a different state required those performing colon hydrotherapy to also be licensed massage therapists. In another state, a practitioner of massage may treat temporomandibular joint dysfunction only if a physician has directly referred the patient in writing for such treatment. One state allows the application of non-prescription topical substances on the body within its scope of practice. This has led massage therapists there to offer facial massage, which really irritates the estheticians, who consider the word "facial" to be theirs alone.

Certainly massage therapists deal with overlapping scopes of practice all the time, but regulatory definitions, scope limitations and educational requirements make it particularly difficult within the broad umbrella of massage therapy. Many well-meaning massage boards have developed broad massage definitions so that other professions aren't able to exclude massage therapists from the conduct of emerging advances in the field. A side-effect of this is that many people get swept up in the regulations that feel like they don't fit a definition of massage. Reiki practitioners in all but the most hard-nosed jurisdictions have been able to exempt themselves from most massage definitions. Other methodologies, which frequently wish to opt out of massage regulation, are reflexology and polarity. They make strong cases for not fitting the definitions of massage in many instances, but my trusty *Webster's* defines reflexology as "a practice involving the use of acupressure or massage of the hands or feet to relieve pain in other parts of the body, reduce tension, etc." The International Institute of Reflexology also lists itself as approved for continuing education by both the Florida Board of Massage and the NCBTMB. Do you think a regulator or layperson reading that definition and noting those approvals would see the merit in granting reflexology an "out"?

Similar difficulty with structural integration, Bowen technique, Asian bodywork, Trager, watsu, CranioSacral Therapy, etc., stems from differences in definition. One I found humorous was *Webster's* definition of Rolfing. It states, "service mark for a form of painful massage intended to relieve emotional tensions by relaxing and repositioning the muscles." My guess is that the Rolf Institute's public relations team will soon be petitioning *Webster's* publisher for a definition change!

The differences in state-by-state definitions and scopes of practice are particularly stressing to massage therapists. As a group massage therapists tend to be a mobile lot and the ability to cross state borders relatively seamlessly should be a boon. An organization had been in place to attempt to find common ground in regulatory language. Unfortunately, the National Alliance of State Massage Therapy Boards is all but dead. It has no leadership and no plans to meet again. Perhaps there can be a grassroots effort to get it re-established.

Thoughts on scope of practice are always affected by definitions. Here are a few (from *Webster's*, of course!) to ruminate on when next you are discussing the benefits of accepting or rejecting regulation, embracing or delaying continuing education, or contemplating whether you are a professional or a hobbyist in massage:

- *Scope* - "the range or extent of action"
- *Practice* - "the exercise of a profession or occupation"
- *Occupation* - "that which chiefly engages one's time; (one's) trade, profession or business"
- *Profession* - "a vocation or occupation requiring advanced education and training, and involving intellectual skills"
- *Professional* - "of, engaged in, or worthy of the high standards of a profession"
- *Trade* - "an occupation requiring skill in any of certain kinds of work done with the hands, as distinguished from unskilled work or from a profession or business."

My high-school biology teacher used to use a phrase that still stays with me: "Ontogeny recapitulates Phylogeny." It refers to life cycles of individual organisms affecting the life cycles of groups of organisms. When we choose to define our scopes of practice, we affect more than just ourselves. As that teacher was alluding to with his jargon, what happens to one is indicative of what happens to many!

Massage Today encourages letters to the editor to discuss matters relating to the publication's content. Letters may be published in a future issue of *Massage Today*. Please send all correspondence by e-mail to cliffimt@mpamedia.com, or by regular mail to the address listed below:

Massage Today
P.O. Box 4139
Huntington Beach, CA 92605

Former editor of *Massage Today*, Cliff is owner of Windham Health Center Neuromuscular Therapy LLC. He is nationally certified in therapeutic massage & bodywork and is licensed as a massage therapist by the states of New Hampshire and Florida. Cliff is a member of the International Association of Healthcare Practitioners; a professional member and past president of the New Hampshire chapter of the American Massage Therapy Association; a certified member of the Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals, Inc.; and a past chairman of the board of directors of the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork.



Page printed from:

http://www.massagetoday.com/archives/2002/04/08.html?no_b=true