

Swimming Upstream Toward Effective Practice

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

"The error that I'm concerned about is to see training as the focus and not learning. This is not a trivial distinction. Training can become a solution looking for a problem and such a one-dimensional focus can undermine the creation of coherent learning strategies.

Training has a role to play but only as part of a wider learning strategy. For instance, we know, from much serious research, that most of what makes people effective in their work does not come from training or education. For most jobs there is an 80/20 rule - 80% of the learning that is of value is from a whole range of activities that the education and training establishment choose to belittle by labeling them 'informal' (for example learning from colleagues, from the work itself, from being coached or mentored, from projects, etc.)."

- *Ian Cunningham*¹

Every now and again, I find myself grabbing some morsel of thought and running upstream through the frothing waters of accepted massage opinion, much like a salmon returning to its home waters. Today's morsel stems from a question posed to me about "how to improve the profession of massage." The center current of opinion, down which most previous effort has run, is that credibility for massage practice is obtainable by coercing the profession together through licensing and mandatory certification. Licensing, however, was never a tool designed by the government to imbue credibility and excellence of practice. It was only intended to protect the public from practices that could cause great physical or economic harm, and for which reasonable consumer knowledge and caution were inadequate remedies. There are no medical statistics indicating that massage practices, especially at the levels covered by licensing, fall into this camp. Similarly, mandatory certification has fallen short of addressing needs of practice that are sufficiently focused to be evident and useful. Applied nonspecifically, certification exams needlessly eliminate many people who are not proficient at short-term memorization, yet could contribute successfully into the more

kinesthetic subpractices of massage. Such exams also are often too general to benefit subpractices more dependent on the manipulation of remembered details.^{4,5}

Instead of the route of government-coerced cohesion, I believe it is past time to acknowledge and value our diversity of subpractices. It is time to create guidelines that provide specific guidance to schools, students and employers for what we actually do in different venues or subpractices of massage. I have taken a rough cut at defining a set of such subpractices in **Table 1**.

Listing and description of suggested subpractices for which to create guidelines. Note that the subpractices do not organize in a single line of increasing knowledge and skills. Likewise, the various subpractices are not all at the same level of knowledge and skills, but simply in different directions of applied technique. Therefore, we can talk about tiers and experience meaningfully only within a given subpractice. Across the total scope of practices, there are different needs for details of anatomy and clinical technique; skills of basic touch and human presence; formality of personal appearance; business skills; and interpersonal skills of communication, psychology and sociology. In many of the areas, communication skills and understanding of the applicable psychology may be as or more important to outcomes than particulars of massage technique. The importance of attitude and support noted for sports injuries is equally applicable to supporting recovery from illness in hospital settings or enhancing quality of life for the aged.^{2,7}

My examination of guidelines on the process of creating guidelines has resulted in **Table 2**. Key aspects of the process are that it be evidence-based; involve all key players; and allow for its own evolution. We must take on the intensive process of first defining massage subpractices, then working with all affected parties to define knowledge, skills and abilities needed to practice effectively in each venue. It is only by hammering out a rough consensus of all participants for each subpractice that we will achieve workable guidelines. It is only when such guidelines have proven to be both useful and widely used that they should be considered as standards.

Table 2. Attributes of guidelines for effective practice. Adapted from Field and Lohr (1990).⁷

Attribute	Discussion
Validity	Compliance with a guideline should clearly improve the effectiveness of early practice by those entering a subpractice of massage.
Reliability/Reproducibility	The evidence and process used should lead to essentially the same guidelines if produced by multiple independent groups of experts.
Applicability	Guidelines should be specific to the needs of each subpractice.
Flexibility	Guidelines should identify expected exceptions to the recommendations.
Clarity	Guidelines should use unambiguous language, define terms precisely, and use logical, easy-to-follow modes of presentation.
Multidisciplinary Process	Guidelines should be developed by a process that includes participation by representatives of key affected groups.
Scheduled Review	Guidelines should include planned reviews to cover new field experience or changing professional consensus.
Documentation	The procedures followed in developing guidelines, the participants involved, the evidence used, the assumptions and rationales accepted, and the analytic methods employed should be meticulously documented and described.

In seeking to form guidelines that promote our ability to

engage effectively in a subpractice of massage, it follows immediately that we need a measure for effectiveness. In this, we owe a debt to the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923). In 1906, Pareto observed that 20 percent of the Italian people owned 80 percent of their country's accumulated wealth. This 80/20 rule of imbalance has since been found to be applicable to many situations.^{6, 8}

Based on the 80/20 rule, we may reasonably expect that, day to day, 80% of the tasks will be performable using about 20% of the subpractice expert's domain-specific knowledge and skills. The implication is that, if a person entering the subpractice comes with this 20% of the subpractice down cold, they will be able to accomplish much without having to stop constantly to consult a mentor or information resource. In all likelihood, they will have much more time and leeway to accumulate incrementally via experience the subsequent 80% of skills and knowledge. By encoding such expectations into guidelines that meet the criteria of Table 2, I believe that we can do much to make our efforts at training and practice more effective.

"You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there."

- *Yogi Berra*

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