

A White Paper on the Evolution of
Massage, Bodywork and Somatic Therapies

On Becoming a Profession:

*The Challenges and Choices that will
Determine Our Future*

(Revised April 2008)

by Rick Rosen, MA, LMBT
300 Southwind Road, Siler City NC 27344
EMAIL: rick@bti.edu

Copyright © 2008 Rick Rosen. All rights reserved.
This document may be distributed to interested parties, but may not be
published or excerpted without the written permission of the author.

Preface

Exactly 30 years ago this month, I got my introduction to massage therapy in an unusual weekend workshop in Atlanta, Georgia. It was taught by couple of college-educated hippies who were traveling around the southeast in a VW Microbus with alfalfa sprouts growing in the back. Their entire training in massage had consisted of a series of six weekend classes in a method that blended deep tissue, energy balancing and emotional release work. I was in the midst of a career change and eagerly jumped on that colorful bandwagon. I've never looked back.

At the time, there were only about two dozen massage schools in the country, and AMTA had fewer than 1000 members. Outside of a tiny fringe of practitioners who were experimenting with new and integrative approaches, Swedish massage was the only modality on the menu. We have indeed come a long way since then. With more than 200 million massage treatments being delivered annually, this can rightly be called an industry. We have 1600 massage schools and 260,000 practitioners from coast to coast, along with two robust professional membership associations and hundreds of companies that produce and sell a wide range of books, equipment and supplies to this field. In the midst of all this growth, however, it's still tough to find a really good massage.

This white paper offers a systems-level analysis of the field of massage, bodywork and somatic therapies. It also provides specific recommendations for policy changes that are needed to address serious problems that have emerged as the result of rapid expansion without coordinated planning. The points of view expressed here are my own, with a perspective that comes from having worked in almost every sector of this field over the past three decades. I observe the trends, and gather information from ongoing conversations with industry leaders and my esteemed colleagues in the realm of education.

I believe we are at a critical juncture. The qualities and attributes that have distinguished this unique field as a healing art are rapidly vanishing. If we don't take charge of our destiny, there are outside entities who will be happy to dine on the fruits of our disorganization—until there is nothing recognizable left on the table. In this challenging environment, each of us is called upon to uphold the integrity and participate in the evolution of our field.

To support the process of discussion, collaboration and decision making, this white paper is being sent to the following stakeholder organizations: ABMP, AMTA, COMTA, FSMTB, NCBTMB, and the AMTA Council of Schools.

—Rick Rosen, February 2008

On Becoming a Profession:

The Challenges and Choices that will Determine Our Future

by Rick Rosen, MA, LMBT

Overview and Assessment.

As the field of massage, bodywork and somatic therapies has evolved, I've been fortunate to both witness and participate in the incredible growth that has occurred over the past 30 years. During this span, hands-on healing has gone from the fringe to the mainstream, becoming a potent force in our economy and health care system. There is much to celebrate: more people are receiving this work, a wider range of treatment approaches is available, and research is validating its therapeutic benefits. But as it often goes, bigger is not always better.

These achievements are tempered by harsh realities that get little mention. New therapists are faced with many impediments to success and tend to have short careers. For every six people who enter the field, five leave permanently.¹ There are serious concerns about the effectiveness of today's massage education and the resulting quality of care that is provided to clients. The field in general is highly disorganized, and we have not even reached agreement on what to call ourselves. (*Note: the term "massage" will be used throughout to refer to the field as a whole.*)

Despite the fact that it has become commonplace to refer to this occupational domain as "the massage therapy *profession*", it lacks a number of essential elements that are considered to be hallmarks of a full-fledged profession. These include: a well-defined body of knowledge; educational standards; teacher training requirements; common terminology; standards of practice; and a regulatory system that affords public protection and allows inter-state mobility for practitioners. While some of these elements exist on a limited scale, there is little consistency among them.

The massage field has grown haphazardly over time, without a central organizing template to shape its development. It can be likened to a patchwork quilt—with a lot of holes in it. By contrast, a profession is based upon a coherent structure and universal standards. Until the work is done to establish this foundation, massage and bodywork will continue to spread across the landscape but our overall situation will not improve. Truth be told, we are not yet a profession, and the mere use of the term does not make it so.

Congruence is a state where the real matches the ideal, and where inner nature is in harmony with outward actions. Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers described congruence as a key attribute of an effective therapist. It is also a defining characteristic of high-functioning individuals, organizations and educational institutions. The title of this article pays homage to his 1961 book, *On Becoming a Person*, which outlines his groundbreaking approach to client-centered therapy that is still quite relevant today.²

The modern era of the massage field began around the time Rogers' book was first published. A life of 40-50 years is considered long enough to have achieved an adult level of maturation. At this age, however, our field has only progressed to the stage of adolescence. And it's showing all the classic signs of teen behavior, with a clamor for individuality, distaste for structure and authority, and widespread confusion about identity. Collectively, we're stuck in this mode—frustrated by the incongruity of our situation. We want respect, power, and a place on the big playing field of health care, but we haven't earned it yet.

A mature profession is the result of many years of diligent efforts and the guiding influences of vision and experience. I am certainly not advocating the kind of soul-numbing standardization and control found in some of the mainstream health care disciplines that have come before us. The innovation and diversity of our field must be preserved at all costs, along with the freedom to practice in the way that best serves the needs of our clients. At the same time, we have to improve therapeutic outcomes and create greater consistency across the many realms where hands-on therapies are taught and delivered.

These core problems and limitations cannot be addressed without significant changes to the status quo. It's a project that will take 10-20 years and will require unprecedented levels of planning and cooperation among the entities that make up this field. They include our professional membership associations, state massage regulatory boards, accrediting agencies, massage schools, businesses that employ massage therapists, and most importantly, the 260,000 hands-on practitioners across the country. We need to move forward together if we want to become a full-fledged profession. *Here are the action steps that will get us there:*

- Establish a Body of Knowledge
- Improve the quality of massage therapy education
- Reorganize the credentialing process by putting licensure before certification
- Create parity among our state massage laws to increase portability
- Develop and promote a unified professional identity
- Use lessons learned from other professions

I. Establish a Body of Knowledge.

According to organizational expert Mickie S. Rops, a Body of Knowledge is defined as “a compendium of what an individual must know to accomplish work in a specific field.”³ In our case, this would be described according to the competencies that are required to practice hands-on therapies in a safe and effective manner. Identifying the *knowledge, skills* and *attributes* is a critical first step in building a profession. It establishes the groundwork for determining standards in education, credentialing, regulation and clinical practice.

Some of this activity has already occurred. The National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork (NCBTMB) conducted four job task analysis surveys since its inception in 1990, which have been used in the development of its certification program. Competency-based curriculum requirements have been established by the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA). However, they only apply to those 90-or-so schools under its authority—out of the 1600 massage schools in the U.S. In 2007, the Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards (FSMTB) conducted its own job task analysis to support the creation of a new national licensing exam. Therapists from a wide range of hands-on disciplines completed this extensive survey.⁴

The most exciting data that came from the FSMTB study was a near-100% correlation on the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for entry-level practice. This included agreement between those in the domain of wellness/spa/relaxation massage vs. clinical/medical massage. There was similar agreement among those who categorized themselves as massage therapists vs. bodyworkers vs. somatic practitioners. This is encouraging news. In the face of so many treatment paradigms and the hundreds of modalities that exist in our field, the data shows what we do is more alike than different!

We have general consensus that a Body of Knowledge is needed, but it is already off to a questionable start. Within the past year, two preliminary meetings have been held at the national level, but several major organizations were excluded. That strategy won't work. An endeavor this important can only happen if all of the key players are involved at the ground floor, and they are able to put aside their own agendas and advocate for the common good. The problem is, we cannot afford the years it may take for some of these groups to get beyond their historic conflicts and learn how to “play well together”.

The Body of Knowledge project must be conducted in a manner that is free of political, financial and philosophical influences. It ultimately comes down to the question of “Who gets to sit at the table and make the final decisions?” I believe the optimal structure for this task is an independent commission of the best and brightest people in our field. To avoid potential conflicts of interest, the members of this panel would not be serving in paid, volunteer or

advisory capacities with any of the stakeholder organizations. Collectively, they would bring the practical knowledge, experience and wisdom needed to get this job done swiftly and soundly. The approach is straightforward: get this panel together with a skilled facilitator, provide them with COMTA's competency standards and the job analysis survey data from NCBTMB and FSMTB, and give them the means to gather any other relevant information. I believe a cogent Body of Knowledge will emerge in short order. The template can then be adopted by the stakeholders, and used to advance our field.

II. Improve the quality of massage therapy education.

The number of institutions offering entry-level massage training has grown at a phenomenal rate over the past decade. What used to be the province of small schools—founded and run by massage therapists who had a passion for sharing the work with others—has morphed into an industry dominated by large corporations and publicly-funded colleges. The 125 largest schools now account for 40% of the student base, according to Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP).⁵ Massage training has become readily available from coast to coast, but its overall quality has declined considerably. One reason is that the number of schools has far outpaced the pool of qualified instructors who are available to teach in these programs.

By improving massage education, the quality of massage therapy services will increase dramatically. In addition to the guidance that a Body of Knowledge will ultimately provide, there are six critical areas that must be addressed:

A. Improve Curriculum Design. Having reviewed hundreds of school catalogs over the years, I've observed that a majority of massage programs present too many modalities and specialized applications in too short a period of time. There is a general tendency toward an over-emphasis on techniques, and an insufficient amount of time spent on the fundamental competencies. This results in graduates who lack a strong foundation. Many programs fail to provide integration among its various courses, and students are left to their own devices to assemble what they've learned into a coherent model. In addition, there are a number of schools where hands-on modalities are taught as a collection of strokes without the benefit of an organizing form. This can create a random and ineffective approach to massage treatment.

B. Require Teacher Training. There are few prerequisites to become a teacher in a massage school, except for having some practical experience in the field. In most every other domain of education, instructors are required to be trained in the theory and methodology of teaching. Such training also includes curriculum design and classroom management strategies.

Only 10% of instructors in massage schools today are estimated to have completed a specific teacher training program (other than the time spent as an in-class assistant). The skill set needed to stand up and lead a classroom full of students is radically different from what it takes to practice massage therapy one-on-one. What we see in many cases is an inexperienced instructor who teaches students—some of whom graduate and become the next wave of inexperienced instructors...and so on. This progressive decline in teaching quality and the dilution of content presented is one of the greatest challenges we face.

C. Focus on Body Mechanics and Self-Care. The average career span of a new therapist is only 2-5 years, according to ABMP.⁶ A shocking 20% of the total number of practitioners in the country leaves the field every year. One of the primary causes of this large and untimely exodus is repetitive strain injuries caused by faulty ergonomics. From my own observations and conversations with leading educators and clinicians, approximately 90% of practitioners fail to employ good body mechanics in their work. How did this happen? If ergonomics and self-care are not given significant time and focus in an entry-level massage program, students are likely to graduate without the necessary skills to protect their physical, emotional and energetic resources. Massage schools must provide the detailed training and ongoing guidance that students need to develop sustainable patterns of usage.

D. Increase Training in Business, Ethics, and Professional Relationships. In the quest for more manual techniques, this is another area that is given short shrift in many curricula. These essential subjects give students the knowledge of how to create a successful career for themselves, along with the skills to navigate the complex territory of client-therapist dynamics. From the standpoint of massage regulation, roughly 95% of the complaints that are filed with state massage boards and the national certification board are the result of improper therapist behavior, rather than faulty massage technique or skipping over a pathology on a health history form. These agencies are flooded with letters from clients describing sexual boundary violations and other ethical breaches, as well as problems resulting from poor communication by therapists and failure to properly manage the client-therapist relationship. What you don't learn in massage school can hurt you—and the public as well.

E. Be Selective in the Admissions Process. With the explosion of massage programs has come the reality of “open admissions”. Unfortunately, not everyone is a suitable candidate to become a massage therapist. It's incumbent on massage schools to screen applicants to ensure that each person has the maturity, along with the cognitive, motor and emotional skills

necessary to succeed in this challenging field. Most publicly-funded colleges and vocational schools admit any citizen who seeks training at one of their campuses. The chains of career colleges offering massage programs tend to be motivated by profit margin, rather than the best interests of the student, the massage field, or the public. Qualifying for financial aid appears to be the only criteria for admission at many such institutions. Too many prospective students are lured by promises of a “dream career in massage”, only to drop out during their training or shortly into practice when they realize they don’t have what it takes.

F. Resolve the Accreditation Conundrum. In other professions, accreditation of educational institutions and specialty programs is the norm. Most commonly, there is a single accrediting agency for a given health care profession. An example would be the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy, which oversees the 200 college-level training programs in the U.S. This kind of structure ensures consistency across a spectrum of institutions. It means that graduates, no matter where they went to school, have received a similar educational foundation. In the massage field, accreditation is not a universal requirement. Only one-third of our schools are accredited, and there are seven different agencies that are involved. Their list of acronyms alone would choke a buffalo. Until all massage schools are accredited under consistent standards—whether by a single agency or a group of agencies—it will be difficult to bring greater coherence to the realm of massage education.

All things considered, the integrity of curriculum design and qualifications of the faculty are far more important to the educational outcome than the number of instructional hours in the program. I believe it’s possible to produce capable entry-level massage therapists in a 500-hour training, but not when they are being taught a dozen different hands-on modalities by inexperienced instructors. We need to get away from measuring programs solely by clock hours, and focus instead on ensuring that students have achieved the core competencies required for the practice of massage therapy.

III. Reorganize credentialing by putting mandatory licensure before voluntary certification.

In virtually every profession, the process of credentialing begins with *mandatory licensure* from a state regulatory board. The two principal requirements are graduation from an accredited program and passing an entry-level licensing examination given under the auspices of the state agency. Following licensure, individuals may choose to pursue *voluntary certification* from a recognized national board or association that focuses on one or more areas

of *specialized practice*. These advanced, or post-graduate certifications are based upon the achievement of designated levels of training and clinical experience. Overall, this two-phase structure has proved to be an optimal means of professional credentialing.

The process is reversed in the massage field, as certification has traditionally preceded licensure. In most regulated states, candidates for licensure must pass the entry-level National Certification Examination (NCE) and become certified by NCBTMB. Following this mandatory step, they may be granted a license to practice if they meet all other state requirements. I have heard a number of people comment, “What’s wrong with this system? We have a national test and it seems to be working just fine.” In fact, there are serious problems inherent in our existing credentialing process: First, certification places an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy in the way of new massage school graduates who want to become licensed and get to work at the earliest possible juncture. Second, state licensing boards have relied on an examination that is administered by an entity over which they have no supervision or control. NCBTMB has no formal accountability to these regulatory agencies, which has raised legal questions about this relationship.

A solution is already underway: In 2005, the Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards was founded to unite the massage regulatory community and strengthen its mission of public protection. One of the first initiatives of FSMTB was the development of its new Massage and Bodywork Licensing Examination (MBLEx), which became available in October 2007. With this in place, state boards now have full ownership of a testing program that meets *generally accepted psychometric principles and standards*.⁷ As the MBLEx becomes the exam of choice over the next several years, it will put licensure as the proper first step in the process—instead of certification.

It is useful to look back at the evolution of our credentialing structure to see how a voluntary certification exam become a mandatory step toward entry-level licensure. The enactment of our state massage laws occurred on a random basis without the benefit of an organizing template. When NCBTMB launched its National Certification Examination in 1992, there were only a dozen states with licensing requirements. Back then, there was a general belief that having a “national test” would be all that was needed for the massage field to gain recognition and enjoy the kind of reciprocity seen in other professions. (We’ve learned a lot since then.)

Based on this premise, the NCE was used as a centerpiece for most of the new state massage laws that have come into existence. It was adopted widely because 1) it was available, 2) it met psychometric standards, and 3) because NCBTMB aggressively promoted it as the best solution. What was originally put forth as a “voluntary” certification program became a

prerequisite for licensure. This had the unintended consequence of giving NCBTMB a great deal of power as the *de facto* gatekeeper for our field.

One example of this influence may be found in the change to the NCE Eligibility Requirements that occurred in 2004. NCBTMB made significant revisions to the curriculum standards that applicants must meet in order to take the exam—without consulting the schools nationwide that provide entry-level massage training. As a result, schools were forced to make changes to their programs to meet the new requirements. A more recent case involves NCBTMB's decision to allow applicants to earn up to 300 hours of distance education out of the total training requirement of 500 hours. While such online course work may be common in other areas of academia, it has not yet been proven to be effective in the unique world of massage education. NCBTMB again took a unilateral action without input from schools, regulators or other stakeholder organizations. Most importantly, these new distance education standards are in conflict with state requirements for licensure. The effects of this policy change remain to be seen.

The big question on the table is what the future role of NCBTMB should be. In addressing this, we must remember that it is chartered as a *certification* agency. As such, its mission and place in the field is different from a state licensing board or a professional membership association. NCBTMB exists solely to serve the public interest by conducting voluntary certification programs. However, this organization's expansive strategic plan—combined with ongoing use of the NCE as a precursor to licensing—has created a great deal of misunderstanding in the massage field around the proper scope of a certification provider. Resolving this will require NCBTMB to make a major shift to its operating model.

Simply stated, NCBTMB needs to transition out of the entry-level testing business and redirect its energies toward the development of new and innovative specialty certification programs. Our field will benefit greatly by having credible credentialing programs for post-graduate education and practice, and NCBTMB is well-positioned for this task. In the world of for-profits, it would be unthinkable to ask a company to voluntarily relinquish a lucrative aspect of its current business—for the prospect of other revenue sources in the future. But unlike entities in the private sector, NCBTMB is a tax-exempt, non-profit corporation that is required by law to serve the greater good. (Their 2006 gross revenues were more than \$8 million dollars.) It is therefore incumbent upon its Board of Directors to take a bold, but necessary step to benefit the public interest and advance the massage field. This is a tremendous opportunity for NCBTMB to be in the forefront of positive change.

We certainly don't need a two-tiered structure of licensure in our field. This approach has been discussed over the years as a way to distinguish entry-level therapists from those who have

accrued more training and experience. What we do need is mandatory licensure as the baseline standard of competency assurance for all therapists, followed by voluntary certification programs in areas of specialized treatment and advanced practice. In the world of professional credentialing, this is the accepted means of recognizing those who demonstrate a strong commitment to building their knowledge and skills.

IV. Create parity among our state massage laws to increase portability.

State licensing laws are never identical from one to the next, but they are said to be *in parity* when they are based upon a common set of standards and requirements. The many discrepancies among our massage laws are the reason that professional mobility is so limited. It is difficult for a therapist who is licensed in one state to obtain licensure in most other states without jumping through inordinate hoops. *Portability* (as it's more commonly known) is something that everyone wants—yet there is no organized plan to achieve it. In fact, the reigning approach to government relations in our field basically ensures that it will *not* happen! Until this scenario changes, licensed therapists will continue to face serious obstacles to obtaining licensure when seeking to practice in other states.

Occupational licensing is adopted by state legislatures to protect the public from harm. Is the practice of massage inherently dangerous? The data shows an extremely low incidence of physical injury caused by massage therapists, which is why our malpractice insurance rates are so low.⁸ Regulation, then, helps to promote the provision of competent services through enforcement of standards for initial licensure and continuing education. In examining the laws that currently exist in 38 states plus the District of Columbia, the biggest challenge we face with massage regulation is inconsistency. Here are some examples:

- The scope of practice definitions are different in every state. This is the language that determines what a therapist is legally allowed to do.
- Education requirements vary greatly, both in the minimum number of instructional hours and curriculum content.
- Certain modalities are exempted from regulation in some states, and licensed in others.
- The examination standards are different from state to state, and many provisions are worded in unduly restrictive ways.
- Massage regulation in some states is under the control of other professional boards or state agencies. In Ohio, the Medical Board is in charge; in Virginia, it's the Board of Nursing; the Board of Chiropractic Examiners oversees licensing in Maryland; and in Texas, the Department of Health Services runs the whole show. These structures make it difficult for massage therapists to influence policy making and enforcement.

In the 12 states that are still without laws, regulation falls to the city and county level. Most local ordinances are throwbacks from the adult entertainment era. Massage therapists may face high licensing fees, intrusive inspection requirements, mandatory STD tests, fingerprinting, and zoning restrictions. Some of the greatest problems of this type are found in California, where ongoing attempts to secure state legislation have been unsuccessful for two decades.

More than 25 new massage laws have been enacted since 1990, and almost all are the result of government relations (GR) efforts conducted by various state chapters of the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA). This GR work has typically been funded by a combination of chapter dues and grants from AMTA at the national level. There are several fundamental problems with this model: AMTA allows its state chapters to run their own show, with final say as to the content of legislative bills, hiring and direction of lobbyists, and control of a bill once introduced into the lawmaking process. The volunteer chapter leaders who make these decisions are massage therapists who may have little or no experience with the intricate (and sometimes ruthless) world of government relations. Individual biases, agendas and preferences often dictate the results. Once in place, state statutes are notoriously hard to amend. And because these laws have a powerful shaping effect on our lives and careers, we cannot afford this work to be done poorly. That's why other disciplines hire teams of professionals to do their GR work.

The AMTA Board of Directors has gone on record endorsing "portability" as a priority for its members. This is a noble objective to declare, but AMTA's long-standing policy of chapter autonomy is in conflict with the need to develop and implement an effective centralized approach to government relations. The association does have GR guidelines in place for its chapters to follow, and encourages them to work with a "coalition" of other groups in the field when pursuing legislation. However, chapters are not required to adhere to these policies; they hold the purse strings and therefore have the last word on decision making. Instead of striving to fill in the rest of the national map with license laws of any kind, we should suspend all new legislative initiatives until a consistent template is created for state regulation that would facilitate the achievement of professional mobility in our lifetime.

Getting a good massage law passed is only the first step. It takes a permanent commitment of resources to support the many facets of a regulatory program, but chapters are left to their own devices to continue this work. Beyond these problems, AMTA has been acting on behalf of the field as a whole, yet they only represent about 20-25% of the massage therapists in any given state. This brings up an issue of fairness. There have also been conflicts between AMTA chapters and state massage boards involving the amendment of existing statutes or administrative rules.

Without a state chapter network, ABMP has had a different history with government relations. That organization emerged in the late 1980's as part of a backlash against AMTA and its efforts to push for regulation and create a national certification exam. Citing mainstream health care models, there was a considerable percentage of practitioners who felt that standardized testing and licensure would drive the "spirit" out of massage and bodywork, and would subject them to unnecessary levels of control. (In retrospect, many of these concerns have indeed come to pass.) Riding this wave of sentiment, ABMP carried out a strong anti-regulation agenda for its first decade, and acted to stop new laws from being passed.

Under new leadership, however, the association began to shift its policy on legislation and has been more proactive over the past decade. More recently, ABMP has sent representatives into certain states to address pending legislative actions on behalf of its members, and is participating in the development of new laws. In 2005, ABMP took a bold step in supporting the establishment of FSMTB. Having an organization that connects and advocates for all state massage boards is one of the foundational elements of a profession.

Changing the regulatory landscape is probably the toughest task on the list. The first step is the development of a *Model Practice Act*. This is the standard tool that has been used successfully in a host of other fields to adopt new laws and revise existing statutes. Bringing parity to state regulations is a very simple in theory, but the process itself is expensive, complex and laborious. Since this directly involves the regulatory community, FSMTB and the state massage boards should have the lead role. As the two largest membership associations, AMTA and ABMP must work together with FSMTB to provide input into the development of a Model Practice Act for our field—and to support the long-term efforts that will be needed to implement it on a state-by-state basis.

V. Develop and promote a unified professional identity.

Doctor. Nurse. Physical Therapist. Attorney. Chiropractor. Psychologist. Members of each of these licensed professions have dozens of areas of specialization within their respective scopes of practice—yet they have achieved a unified identity that is immediately recognizable by the public. By contrast, our field has been mired in an identity crisis which shows no signs of abating. One mark of an immature discipline is an over-association with the small details, and an inability to see the big picture. To date, we have no official definitions that effectively differentiate massage, bodywork and somatic practices. Confusion reigns both within our field, and within the minds of those who are seeking hands-on therapies. Most people have no idea what distinguishes one modality from another, yet therapists commonly use modality names from *Ashiatsu* to *Zero Balancing* as their primary identifier.

The term that is most recognized in the marketplace is MASSAGE THERAPY. This has become the de facto “brand” for our field, driven by media influences and popular usage. By contrast, “bodywork” is an insider’s term that is all but unknown to the general public. It is used within the field by certain modality groups that prefer to be excluded from state massage regulations. An analysis of keywords that are used to search for websites on the Internet reveals that the keyword “massage therapy” and its derivatives are currently used by 96.5% of users, versus 3.5% who search for “bodywork” and its derivatives.⁹ I am aware that the terms “bodywork” and “somatic therapy” refer to practices that may be markedly different from what is practiced as “massage”. The reality is that these fine-grained distinctions are lost on the current and future consumers of our services.

There are also those who have shied away from the term “massage” because of the negative associations around it created by adult entertainment. Over the years, we’ve all suffered through the sly winks and wisecracks that have resulted from this unfortunate blurring of terminology. Try as we might, there’s not much we can do to change the actions of another industry. Instead, we can take charge of our destiny, claim our brand, and use it to powerfully promote this therapeutic discipline. *One discipline... with many approaches.*

VI. Use lessons learned from other professions.

A mature profession has licensure in all 50 states, based upon consistent standards. Its ongoing efforts are shaped and directed by a collection of organizational entities that work in concert with one another: There is the professional membership association (representing the practitioner), the accrediting commission (representing the public), the council of accredited colleges/programs (representing the schools), the federation of state boards (representing the regulatory agencies that protect the public), and one or more certification boards (again, representing the public). This kind of structure operates within a system of checks and balances that keeps any one entity from getting too far from its mission, or claiming an inordinate share of power or control.

These organizations function independently, according to their own bylaws and strategic plans. At the same time, they are part of a unified structure where the actions of each directly influences the entire profession. It’s a lot like the relationship between the organ systems of the human body and the organism as a whole. The health of a given profession depends upon the ethical and efficient operation of each entity, as well as its relationships with the others. To address the collective needs and challenges of the profession, there is ongoing dialogue, planning and cooperation among the leaders of these organizations. This provides the crucial integrating function of intelligence.

While the massage field has yet to achieve this level of functioning, we can learn a lot from those professions who have gone before us. There are best practices we can adopt, as well as obvious pitfalls to avoid. A veritable ocean of resources is available from two groups that serve this industry: CLEAR—The Council for Licensure, Enforcement & Regulation; and FARB—The Federation of Associations of Regulatory Boards. In my experience, I have found leaders from other established professions to be most generous with their time and expertise, and eager to help a “new” discipline get on its feet.

Crafting the model for our future.

The reason I got into this field is the same reason I have stayed: I believe passionately in the healing and transformative power of human touch. I want this work to be carried out in a highly effective and respectful manner, with the most diversity of traditions represented, to benefit the greatest number of people. We have a unique opportunity to be on the vanguard of a new healing paradigm for our culture. To step into this role with congruence as a true profession, we have to face the current shortcomings of the field and be willing to do the diligent work. While the problems and solutions I have outlined here will be addressed individually, each one is part of a larger evolutionary process that requires holistic thinking and action. It’s time to craft a new model that our organizational leaders can utilize as they make the policy changes that will set the course for our future.

About the Author:

Rick Rosen is a North Carolina Licensed Massage and Bodywork Therapist who has 30 years of experience in the field. He is founder and co-director of the Body Therapy Institute, a COMTA-accredited massage school in Siler City, NC. He has a masters degree in psychology from West Georgia College, is a graduate of the Florida School of Massage, and earned certifications in structural integration and body-centered psychotherapy. Rick developed and teaches *The Way of Ease®*, a system for optimizing practitioner performance and improving therapeutic outcomes.

He was the founding chairman of the NC Board of Massage & Bodywork Therapy, and served as a co-founder and first executive director of the Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards. Rick is a member of ABMP, a charter member and past president of the AMTA North Carolina Chapter and is Nationally Certified in Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork. He is a contributing author to *Teaching Massage: Fundamental Principles in Adult Education for Massage Program Instructors* (Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, June 2008 publication), and serves as an educational consultant to the Program on Integrative Medicine, University of North Carolina School of Medicine.

Notes:

1. 2007 Massage Industry Research Report, American Massage Therapy Association.
2. Rogers, Carl R. *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin, 1961.
3. Rops, Mickie S. *Identifying and Using a Field's Body of Knowledge*. ASAE Foundation, 2002.
4. 2007 Job Task Analysis Survey Results, Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards.
5. 2006 Massage School Survey, Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals.
6. 2007 Member Survey, Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals.
7. "Generally accepted psychometric principles and standards" refers to the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999, American Psychological Association; American Educational Research Association; National Council on Measurement in Education), and *Principles of Fairness: An Examining Guide for Credentialing Boards* (Revised 2002, Council on Licensure, Enforcement, and Regulation; National Organization for Competency Assurance). These standards form the basis for the accrediting process administered by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).
8. Grant, Keith. Massage safety: injuries reported in Medline relating to the practice of therapeutic massage — 1965–2003. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*, 7(4), 207-212.
9. Internet keyword analysis from Wordtracker. Accessed at <http://www.wordtracker.com>.