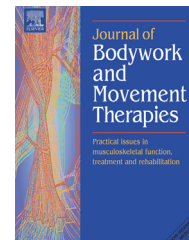


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PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

A guiding framework to understand relationships within the profession of massage therapy

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Summary An element of professionalization is the development of a body of knowledge and the integration of that knowledge into practice, also known as evidence-informed practice (EIP). EIP was officially adopted in Ontario, Canada, by the massage therapy profession in 2002 when the professional competency document was updated to include competencies related to research literacy (College of Massage Therapists of Ontario, 2002). Despite efforts to increase EIP, there continues to be a research-practice gap in massage therapy. However, there also seems to be interest in finding ways to support the increase massage therapists' capacity to apply research. To support change, it is useful to describe the relationships in the profession that may have an effect on the use of evidence in practice and the development of a broader culture of inquiry. In order to better understand how these relationships may impact on EIP, an ecological model is proposed.

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Introduction

Massage therapy is an emerging profession, and differs in its professionalization trajectory depending on jurisdiction. Professionalization is the process by which an occupation develops into a profession, complete with standards of practice, common educational standards, and a code of conduct (Gowan-Moody and Baskwill, 2006). An element of

professionalization is the development of a body of knowledge and the integration of that knowledge into practice, also known as evidence-informed practice (EIP). EIP is the integration of practitioner expertise, patient values, and the best available evidence to clinical decision making (Sackett, 1997).

EIP was officially adopted in Ontario, Canada, by the massage therapy profession in 2002 when the professional competency document was updated to include competencies related to research literacy (College of Massage Therapists of Ontario, 2002). The inclusion of these

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competencies required educational programmes provide related instruction such that students and graduates would develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with EIP. Some studies to date have investigated RMTs' attitudes toward research and their confidence in their abilities to find and understand studies (Suter et al., 2007; Gowan-Moody et al., 2013), and a recent study explored RMTs' awareness of the current evidence for practice, which may be key to the integration of research into practice to affect patient care (Baskwill and Dore, 2015).

Despite efforts to increase the standard, or expectation, of EIP, there continues to be a research-practice gap in massage therapy. However, there also seems to be interest in finding ways to support the profession to increase its capacity to apply research to practice. To support change in the massage therapy profession, it is useful to describe the relationships in the profession that may have an effect on the use of evidence in practice and the development of a broader culture of inquiry. In order to better understand how these relationships may impact on EIP, an ecological model is proposed.

An ecological model is a comprehensive framework that shows relationships and influence between individuals and organizations. It can be used to show the diversity within the overall society or social group, the complex interconnectedness within the group, and the impact of one system on the others (McLaren and Hawe, 2005). Ecological models are useful for describing relationships and illustrating theoretical mechanisms by which intervention may occur resulting in change (Satariano, 2006). The framework presented herein was built using the model created by Bronfenbrenner (1977) and the models proposed by Satariano (2006) and McLaren and Hawe (2005), which were also built using Bronfenbrenner's original work.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework

In the model described by Bronfenbrenner (1977), there are 5 systems that each sit within the larger one above it, like nested bowls or dolls. The highest system, called the macrosystem, 'refers to the overarching patterns of ideology and organization that characterise a given society or social group' (McLaren and Hawe, 2005). As this is the highest level, all settings, organizations and relationships within the lower systems have influence on the macrosystem. Conversely, it can be argued that the higher systems each influence the systems within as well.

The second system, which sits immediately in the macrosystem, is the exosystem. The exosystem consists of the 'linkages between settings that a person may or may not directly participate in, but that are none the less relevant because of their impact on [the individual's] immediate environment' (McLaren and Hawe, 2005). Generally speaking, these are settings such as local politics that all individuals may not participate in but the decisions of which may influence the immediate setting of the individual, also known as the microsystem.

The mesosystem sits between the exosystem and the microsystem and consists of overlap between settings. In other words, the mesosystem includes interactions that combine settings (McLaren and Hawe, 2005). Continuing

the example of local politics, although the individual may not be a politician themselves, when he or she attends a political rally on a cause related to his or her immediate setting, such as family or work, this interaction between local politics (exosystem) and family or work (microsystem) falls within the interactions described in the mesosystem.

Finally, the individual is both affected by the systems above it and has an effect on those systems. The individual is, literally, the individual within the system. For the example above, the individual could be a politician or one of the constituents. That person could be actively or passively involved.

Applying an ecological framework to massage therapy

Using the general model discussed above, it is believed that an ecological model is useful to describe the relationships in the massage therapy profession that may have an effect on the use of evidence in practice and the development of a broader culture of inquiry. Awareness and utilization of evidence require a complex integration of behavioural, social and environmental skills, knowledge and supports occurring at different levels, from the individual to the broader profession. Although some of the discussion and assumptions in this framework have not yet been investigated in massage therapy and should be considered as potential areas of future study, an ecological model provides a way to explain this complexity. It is important to note that the profession of massage therapy specific to the jurisdiction of Ontario, Canada, is used for the illustration of this framework. With this said, the framework could be reworked to apply to any jurisdiction (Fig. 1).

Macrosystem

At the highest level, or macrosystem, in the ecological framework for evidence-informed massage therapy (EIMT) is the culture of the broader massage therapy profession. Specific to EIMT, there are two concepts that either currently do, or if adopted could, influence the use of evidence in practice. These are scope of practice for MT and the concept of research mindedness.

In Ontario, the scope of practice of massage therapy includes 'the assessment of the soft tissue and joints of the body and the treatment and prevention of physical dysfunction and pain of the soft tissue and joints by manipulation to develop, maintain, rehabilitate or augment physical function, or relieve pain' (Government of Ontario, 1991). The scope of practice is an important consideration as it frames what practitioners do and what they believe is important to their practice. It might be expected that massage therapists would prioritize knowledge that is related to musculoskeletal health over knowledge related to gastrointestinal health. For example, the current evidence related to the use of massage therapy for immediate pain relief in people experiencing neck pain would be of interest to practitioners (Cheng and Huang, 2014).

With this said, massage therapy in Ontario is a wholistic practice, that considers the health of the entire person

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