NORTHWESTERN HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY

THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING LICENSURE FOR MASSAGE THERAPISTS IN MINNESOTA

A Policy Statement from Northwestern Health Sciences University

Massage Therapists who practice in Minnesota are currently not licensed, registered or otherwise regulated at a State level in a manner similar to other health professionals – or even cosmetologists, barbers and body art technicians.

Minnesota is one of only four remaining states that lack such a regulatory mechanism, and the only one in the upper Midwest. In the majority of states where massage therapy is regulated, massage therapists must meet legal requirements to practice which include a standard minimum hours of entry level training in a school or program accredited by a national organization and may have annual continuing education requirements.

A nationally accredited examination to license or certify the massage therapist, administered by the state, is also a requirement.

In Minnesota, however, most massage therapists are regulated by local municipalities, which often have different licensing requirements, standards for practice and fees. In essence, the current arrangement regulates these professionals as business entities rather than healthcare providers. This creates wide variability in educational requirements, practice standards, fees paid by practitioners, an unnecessary administrative burden on cities, and most importantly an opportunity for illicit activity to occur under the guise of massage therapy. This is a disservice to the public, patients and other healthcare professionals who work with massage therapists.

Massage Therapy Education

The educational landscape for massage therapy is diverse, ranging from small single-purpose schools to regionally accredited colleges and universities offering two-year degree and certificate programs. Although the number of contact hours may vary across institutions and learner groups, instruction in subjects such as anatomy and physiology, body systems, massage therapy theory and techniques, and professional ethics are common curriculum components.

In addition, while it is not necessary for an institution to be accredited in order to provide training in massage and bodywork therapy, there are several national agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) that have established educational standards and provide accreditation services for this growing profession. Of the DOE-recognized specialized accreditors, the **Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation** has established **curriculum competencies** regarding professional knowledge and abilities.

Of the 16 schools in Minnesota that offer massage therapy education, only a few are currently not accredited.

[1] Throughout this policy statement, references to massage therapy and therapists also includes Asian Bodywork Therapy.

Where they Practice

While the majority of massage therapists throughout Minnesota practice in independent clinics, they are increasingly providing care in larger settings such as fitness centers, skilled nursing facilities, and alongside other licensed professionals in multidisciplinary clinics.

Further, massage therapists demonstrate value as part of the healthcare workforce in notable Minnesota hospitals and health systems, including:

- **The Mayo Clinic**
- **Essentia Health** in Duluth and other locations
- Hospice services at **Hennepin Healthcare** and **Sholom Johnson Hospice**
- **Allina Health** at Penny George Institute for Health and Healing (Abbott Northwestern Hospital), Owatonna Hospital and St. Francis Regional Medical Center
- **Children's Minnesota**
- **HealthPartners Lakeview Hospital**

The Benefits of Massage Therapy

Patients and clients of massage therapists seek care for reasons ranging from general well-being and stress relief to help with a variety of medical conditions – most often pain, injury recovery and headaches.

In recent consumer surveys reported by the **American Massage Therapy Association**, between 19 and 24% of adult Americans received at least one massage in 2016-17 and, of those, 43% reported receiving massage for medical or health reasons – especially pain management – and 18% had discussed massage therapy with their doctors or other healthcare providers.

Massage therapy is increasingly recognized within conventional medicine as an important care component due to the wide range of health benefits. This is described by Mayo Clinic physician Brent Bauer, MD, in this **Massage is Good Medicine** video message. Massage therapy is recommended as a first-line treatment for back pain, according to the 2017 **Clinical Practice Guideline** published by the American College of Physicians. In its standards for hospitals and other accredited healthcare organizations, the **Joint Commission** recommends massage as one of several nonpharmacologic modalities for pain management.

Licensure will potentially lead to expanded public program and private insurance plan coverage for massage and bodywork therapy as a result of further recognition of the health benefits associated with this service. This would be advantageous to primary care clinics, hospitals and health systems who desire to include massage and bodywork therapy services for the benefit of patients they serve.

To illustrate this point, beginning in 2019, the **Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services** will provide insurers offering Medicare Advantage plans with the option of including therapeutic massage as a supplemental benefit. And, in a 2017 letter to the President and CEO of America's Health Insurance Plans, 37 **State Attorneys General** encouraged coverage for alternatives to opioids in the treatment of pain – including massage therapy

Licensure and Board Certification

Although Minnesota is not among them, 46 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation and enacted statutes for the regulation of massage and bodywork therapists. As early as 1915, Ohio was the first state to regulate the massage therapy profession through the State Medical Board since it was considered a "limited branch of medicine."

However, in Minnesota these healthcare professionals are unlicensed and considered complementary and alternative healthcare providers under **Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 146A** which was enacted in 2000. In addition to massage and bodywork therapy, a wide variety of other practices are listed that are available from providers who are also not licensed or registered by boards within the Minnesota Board of Health or other regulatory agencies.

Across the country, **massage therapy licensure requirements** and regulatory mechanisms vary from state-to-state, and yet there some common elements including, for example, total number of instructional hours, curriculum and coursework, criminal background checks and certification examination.

Here in Minnesota, legislation that is under development for introduction in the 2019 session will, among other things, contain a provision that focuses on the essential competencies required of massage therapists.

Many therapists in Minnesota are also credentialed through the **National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork** (NCBTMB). Board certification through this organization constitutes a separate credential above and beyond entry-level state licensure, and applicants are required to pass an examination that requires candidates to demonstrate their assessment skills, knowledge of orthopedics and other clinical sciences, and the ability to develop treatment plan.

In addition, the **Massage and Bodywork Licensing Examination** administered by the Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards is increasingly becoming the standard for entry-level licensing across the country. This examination, developed by educators for the profession, also supports the need for licensure in Minnesota.

Combined with the training and care they provide to patients and clients, the professional credentials required for state licensure elsewhere across the country and voluntary board certification illustrate that massage therapists comprise an evolving and emerging healthcare profession.

Public Policy Implications

State licensure is an important step for the recognition and inclusion of massage therapies more broadly in Minnesota's healthcare delivery system. Like all other licensed health professions, there is a compelling need to standardize regulations for the practice of massage therapy which is currently left to local jurisdictions rather than a state agency.

Licensure will provide added assurance to consumers that their therapist has the qualifications and professional credentials necessary to practice and that there is a single state agency with the necessary resources to investigate and adjudicate patient complaints. In the case of pending legislation here in Minnesota, that responsibility would fall with the **Board of Nursing** which supports and is committed to serving in this regulatory role – and can function through a single fee structure and with minimal financial impact on providers.

Bringing massage therapists into the company of other licensed professionals may also lead to their recognition and inclusion in innovative care delivery programs – particularly new clinical initiatives designed to address pain management – and increase the likelihood of financial support from government and private funding sources.

Massage therapy licensure will also help to strengthen and support local municipalities in state-wide efforts to control and eliminate human trafficking by shifting primary responsibility for provider credentialing, complaint investigation and, when necessary, sanctioning and licensure revocation to a state agency that serves the same role with regard to other healthcare professionals.

Why we need Licensure in Minnesota

Over the past decade, Northwestern Health Sciences University has actively engaged with other institutions and organizations to introduce and pass legislation to bring about state-wide regulation of massage therapists. Here are the reasons we will continue to support and assist now in the effort to establish licensure in Minnesota:

1. Massage therapists can have a significant impact on an individual's health and well-being. It is in the best interest of the public to ensure that these healthcare providers are regulated in a manner consistent with other health professions. Simply stated, those who seek help from massage and bodywork therapists have a right to expect that their provider has the training and qualifications needed to practice effectively, safely and ethically.

2. Licensing creates a uniform standard of conduct that is enforceable by a state agency, rather than local municipalities who may lack the resources and expertise necessary to regulate healthcare professionals.

3. In 2009, the legislature tasked the Minnesota Council of Health Boards with reviewing the need for this regulatory process. They reported that there is an, "overall compelling state interest" in regulating this industry to protect public health and safety from the actions of unqualified, unethical, improperly trained practitioners who are not currently regulated.

4. Massage therapists who work in more than one location are currently required to pay fees in every city in which they practice, often ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars, and meet a range of requirements. One state credential would dramatically simplify the regulatory burden on those therapists who practice independently.

5. Implementing state-wide legislation is also important in the fight against human trafficking. By having standards in place at the state level, there will be a mechanism to regulate and distinguish between legitimate healthcare professionals from those individuals who participate in illicit activity such as human trafficking and prostitution.

From the Center for Healthcare Innovation and Policy

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