

## **Diversity And The Challenge of Change**

By Jerry Blackburn DN, CMT

The evolution of Massage Therapy and Bodywork as we know it is in the process of drastic change that will be fostered by the profession, or dictated by those that may wish to control us or persuade us for their own purposes. As our profession grows, we must make those decisions that will maintain our diversity, autonomy, and consequently, our effectiveness. For if these are undermined, Massage Therapy as we know it will be lost to so many whose need is so great.

By their choice, the public has shown very clearly to all the professions that Massage has an important role in their lives. Our diversity has been the vehicle of this public validation. It's also the source of the inability of the Health Care Field to trust our authenticity. In our case, validation has not come from the powers that control the economics of related fields, but rather from the public we have helped. It has been a grass roots denial of the rejection of Massage by other professions threatened by our growth. Thousands of Massage Therapists and Bodyworkers have been quietly and independently developing their own protocols for dealing with their clients concerns.

Over many years of experience, the practical

and methodical forming of these hybrid protocols of treatment through careful thought, observation, results orientated changes in techniques and their sequences; is responsible for the huge diversity of style and technique that permeates our profession. The "old-timers" or pioneers of Massage have been the ones that have fostered the public acceptance and are responsible for this vast diversity. They are also the ones who have taught these concepts through a mentoring process necessary for the profession's advancement and essential to its future. This diversity and its contribution to our present popularity and acceptance has been fostered and supported by the existing educational network. This system has evolved through the uncontrolled free market and has served our needs by reflecting our diversity. Without it, the profession's present profile runs the risk of losing its base.

The Health Care Field is showing an increased interest since Scientific Research is beginning to confirm the claims our profession has made for the last 30+ years. It has lured segments of our profession into a misconception that has initiated a calculated movement to adjust educational requirements toward a medical model. This misconception is that the validation we are

receiving through this medical model is more valid than that we have received from the public and the free market forces. A move in this direction could drastically change market perceptions and attach us to a segment of business that is on a down hill slide of negative public perception. We may face the possibility of gaining status but losing the credibility it has taken us so long to establish.

The disappointing aspect of this "adjustment" to national educational requirements is that it has been enacted by a very small segment of the massage and bodywork community. This action has been initiated without understanding the ramifications of this action and its drastic effects on the profession as a whole. It has been done without open discussion, debate, or consensus.

This illustrates a lack of very basic knowledge of business principles by very highly educated people. This situation drives home the point that our profession has a void of understanding in this area. Perhaps the "adjustments" to the education would be more productive by including significant business courses to the basic curriculum. This has been a real deficiency in the basic programs that would give the newly graduated practitioners the ability to survive their first three years. This would certainly serve the vast majority of graduates and the whole profession more practically than the medically orientated changes that have been dictated. Especially when these changes benefit a very small percentage of our

profession.

An alternative to serving this minor market in the profession through basic requirements would be to develop specific continuing education classes to enhance the skills more inherent to medical applications. This makes the decision a personal choice and a career move, and does not disrupt the ability of the profession to serve the future needs of the largest segment of the public market. Interestingly, there are no provisions in these adjusted educational requirements for anything on prevention, over 80% of the available market for massage.

To totally appreciate the impact of education on the future growth we must look at the next ten to fifteen years and their business implications. From a business stand point, the most recognized and accepted fact in trends is that the Baby-Boomers have in the past and will in the future, set the largest segment of the Market. The importance of this group and its impact in the development of any portion of American Business has been well documented. It is one of the first groups marketing experts consider in new product design. At this time, most of these people are reaching the age where their concern is moving toward quality of life and longevity. This "Approaching Geriatric" segment of the population will be increasing at its greatest rate in history. Unfortunately, a large number are not financially prepared for retirement, and a lower disposable income will be the norm as they retire. If we are to support the need of this segment of the population, the service we provide must



be affordable, regardless of its Wellness or Traditional Health Care origin. It will be a universal problem to the profession.

The challenge we face will be our ability to supply sufficient numbers of competent new practitioners through the evolution of the existing educational network and the free market forces. If we don't, the demand will push the price of Massage upwards and out of the reach of the Baby Boomers personal ability to choose Massage as an alternative. Should this higher cost occur, the temptation would be to shift these services into the medical and insurance paid model instead of the free market.

Although this is financially attractive for a few, this move has the potential of changing the whole landscape of the profession overnight. It will eliminate the largest potential Massage market from the largest segment of the Massage profession. In addition, this move toward the medical model does not reflect the desire of the majority segment of the profession. That is, the vast number of Wellness applications from which it has evolved. This group wants the freedom of the "autonomous independent contractor status", and does not want to become part of the current logic of the Health Care Field. If this shift is made, many of these practitioners may be forced to give up their autonomy to make a living.

There are two actions by segments of the profession that will greatly challenge our ability to supply an increasing number of

practitioners through our schools. The two actions are the increase of the entry-level education hours with increased emphasis on medical orientation, and the move to force schools into accreditation. The first will raise the cost of education and reduce the number of students entering the field. The second will affect 80% of the existing schools by putting unrealistic demands on the small business segment. This would require the small school owner to hire a full time person just to take care of the paper work, and to write out a very large check for a service that is already handled by most states through an approval process.

We, as a profession, have had the luxury of being the fly on the wall within the business community. No body has noticed us. The ones that do, consider us a non-factor in business, legislative, and Health Care issues. We have grown in numbers, public influence, and demand for our services. Unlike many of the professions that have come before us, we have the benefit of observing the mistakes they have made. We are at a critical point in the development of the profession. The Associations that serve us are the key to our future. They have evolved from supplying professional insurance to a whole range of other services. Some return phone calls in 24 hours, and others don't ever return calls. Some have formed and started specialty groups that may or may not be appreciated by the profession as a whole. A very few are a-political and are constantly trying to do what is right for the whole profession. Then there

are a few who are divisive and work for only a small segment of the profession without concern of the ramifications for the rest. For the most part, the intent of these organizations is to do the right thing. The problem that now confronts our profession is that these organizations are in strategic positions. Their activities can and are drastically shaping the direction Massage and Bodywork is heading. The question is how do we hold these organizations accountable for their actions? How do we influence their decisions and monitor them to assure that private agendas for a few are not being pursued at the cost of many? The only way an association can prove itself to the profession is to step up and lead by example.

I believe the Touch for Health Association has an incredible chance to become a moving force in the Massage Community. The advancing Baby-Boomer market is tailor made for the preventative aspects of TFH. Add to this the need of small schools to expand their curriculums to meet the competition of the universities and community colleges. The addition of business and marketing courses designed to prepare their graduates for the business world, will complete the package. The intent is to help the profession by marketing TFH into small school curriculums. The program's design will empower the schools to teach TFH over the full length of their programs. This will allow the students to gain a command of the complexities of TFH, learn how to integrate it with conventional techniques, become a

viable member of the TFH Association, and learn how to market these services to the public. This helps the small school network to remain intact at a time of high competition, it helps to prepare the profession for Baby-Boomer Market, and it fills a void in the professions overall lack of basic business knowledge. Add to this, the ability for the TFH association to expand its numbers and have a voice in the direction of the profession. Everybody wins!

However, the biggest winners in this endeavor will be the Baby-Boomers and the American Health Care System. The effects of the Preventative aspects on the cost of Health Care alone have the potential to be enormous. Think of the possible impact on the record number of diabetics this group is projected to produce. An army of practitioners with integrative skills will be spreading preventative knowledge through their daily work.

Our profession is desperate for leadership that has the intent to help the whole profession move forward. The need for unity in a direction that honors the diversity of our profession is critical for its autonomous survival

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