Client Education and Degree-Qualified Massage Therapists: Attitudes and Practice Patterns

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Introduction
Many healthcare professionals, including massage therapists, believe client education is valuable and can lead to improved treatment outcomes.1 Client education is often an integral part of holistic, client-centred healthcare and includes home exercise, condition management, and postural and nutritional advice.2 It is the researcher’s (YLC) belief that client education is essential to provide a client with the best possible treatment outcome in a massage treatment. In their education, bachelor-degree qualified massage therapists learn to apply a biopsychosocial approach to health through their assessment, clinical reasoning, and treatment.3 There are many studies related to client education in physiotherapy that have been done, but little is known about client education by degree qualified massage therapists (DQMT) in New Zealand (NZ).

Objective
To investigate the importance of client education to DQMTs and to provide baseline information of New Zealand DQMTs’ opinions of the importance of client education in a massage treatment intervention. The frequency of different educational strategies used in clinical practice, the benefits of client education, and the clients’ receptiveness to participating in client education were also explored.

Method
A mixed methods approach was used with the initial survey followed by interviews. This research was part of a larger research project and questions in the survey and interviews came from the entire group. The online survey consisted of 36 questions; 2 were about client education. Semi-structured interviews were 20–45 minutes in duration and conducted via phone or face-to-face by the researchers. Interview questions were:

- Are your clients’ generally receptive to participating in client education?
- Why do you think your clients are or are not receptive to client education?
- What have you found to be the main benefits from educating your clients?

DQMTs were recruited via email snowball sampling and invited to participate with data collection from March to July 2018. Survey participants indicated their willingness to participate in phase 2 interviews. Ethical approval was granted by the Southern Institute of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee in 2018.

Participants
Survey: 64 respondents. Most respondents were female (79.7%); n = 51/64, New Zealand European (81.3%); n = 52/64, and between 20 to 60+ years. Interviews: 28 respondents.

Results

Benefits of Client Education

Increased client trust, rapport, and repeat clients

Some of the respondents stated a high confidence to deliver client education interventions to their clients because of the degree based massage training they had. In the interview Kim said, “a lot of them thrive off the bit of education and I think they respect and get a great understanding around my knowledge and my level of degree-based massage.” Nancy had similar thoughts saying, “I think because of my degree there is a trust there and I believe what I say.” Furthermore, in the interviews, some therapists stated that through client education they had built up a real rapport with their clients and led to more repeat clients. For instance, Annie reported, “I think they feel as a practitioner that you’re actually genuinely trying to help them.” Lucia commented, “They definitely come back, that’s for sure.”

Better condition management and client empowerment

Many participants reported that clients were more receptive to client education when they understood their condition and the rationale behind the treatment plan. For example, Christine answered, “If we’re able to break down the reasoning behind why we want to do something, they really take a hold of that themselves and they’re much more likely to go through and follow through with those exercises or self-massage, or something that we’ve given them to do if they understand why.” Most participants believed that clients need to take responsibility for their own health and wellness and successful client education could empower clients. Maggie noted that, “I think it’s important to empower people to be in charge of their own physical wellness, so that they’re not completely reliant on me.”

Improved treatment outcomes and quality of life

In the interviews, some participants answered cure and prevention are the main benefits. Jack noted, “Sometimes it’s a cure, sometimes it’s a prevention for them to not have it happen again. I guess that’s the benefits.” Kim answered, “Absolutely, you get better results.” Additionally, some participants reported that successful lifestyle change and improving quality of life are main benefits from client education too. In the interview, Sami noted that, “they can make lifestyle changes, changes that they can actually use through their whole lives, things like changing diets, or their breathing or their sleeping patterns.” Chris commented, “Their pain and their tightness goes away faster, they’re able to get back to the things that they couldn’t do, and that therefore improves their quality of life.”

Barriers to Client Education

Client’s reduced body awareness

Some therapists mentioned that reduced body awareness as a barrier to clients participating in client education. Susan explained that, “It’s kind of like some people are just not that in touch with their body, those people that are a bit less body aware, I sort of haven’t figured out how to communicate to them more effectively.” Daphne agreed, “which is another reason having a sports focus, or working with athletes is just so much easier. They care more about their bodies.”

Client’s commitment to client education

In the interview, a few therapists reported that clients’ lack of commitment and self-discipline to complete client education is a major barrier. Sid reported, “they think they can deal with their problem because they want to be hands off with their own problem.” Daphne had similar thoughts saying, “they just want you to do all the hard work.”

Discussion

The percentage of the DQMTs’ gender and ethnic composition in this study are similar to the massage therapists in a previous study.1 The previous study noted the main benefits of clients’ participating in client education were improved treatment outcomes and therapist-client trust. The present findings also demonstrated DQMTs frequently used educational strategies, namely home exercises; condition management; teaching and informing the clients about their conditions; postural, ergonomic advice and self-massage instruction. The results highlighted the importance of client education and the kind of clinical educational strategies used by DQMTs in NZ today. The frequency rates of self-massage instruction and advice used by DQMT in their practices is a bit lower than these above four strategies. To find why self-massage instruction is less frequency utilised as a client educational strategy, further study is needed.

The study demonstrated the mental health advice and nutrition advice are not frequently used by DQMT in their practices, possibly because these areas are outside the scope of practice for a DQMT. The study revealed two barriers to client engagement in client education: the client’s reduced body awareness and lack of commitment and self-discipline to complete their client education. This study suggests therapists believe that client education strategies can increase the clients’ body awareness which may assist in addressing the clients’ areas of concern. Further study is warranted to find ways to improve client commitment to complete client education.

In conclusion, this study has highlighted that DQMTs value client education and, for many, it is integral to their treatment.

Limitations

As a group project, client education was not explored in depth in the survey. Inclusion criteria: Not all members of the MT profession were represented and results may not be generalisable to the profession.

References