Is it Time for a CHANGE?
Evaluating the Need for Degree Qualified Massage Therapists to be able to Differentiate Themselves in the Market
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INTRODUCTION
Massage therapy is not regulated by the government in NZ, & therefore anyone can ‘set-up-shop’ without any legalised qualifications.1 Although the education for massage therapists can be seen to be evolving, a lack of standardised education exists, contributing to a lack of recognition as a legitimate healthcare profession by both the wider health community & the general public. Steps have been taken by the massage industry that signify an aspiration for professional status, such as the development of a professional body & some standardisation of the qualifications available.1 However, there seems to be a gap between what the massage industry are trying to portray in terms of a professional identity, & the expectations often associated with professions. For example, within MNZ, those who have attained a higher level of massage therapy education are not given recognition or fair representation within this body, and the varying levels of education required to gain membership do not meet the education standards of recognised health professionals.2 As a result, there appears to be a lack of differentiation between levels of massage qualification in order to be perceived as legitimate health professionals. The aim of this study was to explore degree qualified massage therapists’ perspectives when considering the need to be able to differentiate themselves within the industry.

METHODS
This study employed a qualitative approach of two telephone focus group interviews n=5, n=4.
Inclusion criteria: therapists who had attained a Bachelor's qualification in massage therapy in NZ.
Questions were developed in regards to identity, qualification levels, recognition, professional status & strategies that could enable a differentiation between levels of therapists in the industry.
Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes within the data. Results reported using pseudonyms.
This study was approved by the IS Human Research Ethics Committee.

KEY TOPICS, THEMES, & EXAMPLES

Perceptions of Identity & Role
- Assist client goals to optimise musculoskeletal function e.g. rehabilitative care, maintenance care & the use of strengthening & stretching prescriptions within this. “Most of my clients is involved with musculoskeletal work . . . relief from anything from pain, aches, stiffness, injuries & rehabilitating them.” (Pearly)
- A “holistic” approach to healing e.g. taking into account the wider aspects of the individual “I address diet, health, stress, & coping strategies . . . not just massage.” (Pearly)
- Relaxation massage
- Specialty areas e.g. oncology, lymphedema, palliative, dry needling & sports massage

The Need for a Differentiation Between Degree Qualified Massage Therapists & Those Less Qualified
- Yes (7/9)believed based on their higher education a differentiation necessary “I think there is a need to differentiate our qualification partly because we have so much better in-depth knowledge.” (Pearly)
- Due to current lack of recognition by public & wider health community all faced challenges differentiating themselves within the market “I think education of the public is important as well as educating other health professionals. Without the understanding all massage therapists are seen equally regardless of if you have a certificate or a diploma or a degree because they don’t know what we actually do.” (Mary)

Differentiating Characteristics of Degree Level Massage Education
- Greater in-depth knowledge & hands-on skill, research literacy & capacity to critically think “When I finished [the diploma] I knew I didn’t have enough information, the third year has made a huge difference. Pathology . . . physiology . . . psychology, the third year year put together a whole package, it gives you an in-depth understanding of where your client is coming from & what other possible requirements are there to put a whole rehabilitation package together. Certainly in the diploma there is no way I could have done that.” (Pearly)
- I am a lot more confident in looking at research papers and using it effectively within my practice.” (John)
- Credibility to practice & to perform at an esteemed level “You learn the ability to critically think. If you are not getting the results that you think you would like to see in your clients after a few sessions then I think you have a better way of working out better treatment options.” (Rachel)
- I had one doctor say to me, ‘a diploma, there are so many variations on it depending on where you study. But everyone knows with a degree qualification regardless of what it is there is a certain level that had to be attained to reach that.” (Susan)
- Confidence & better equipped to practice “A degree gives me more confidence when talking to my clients & falling back on the pathologies and medical knowledge that we have integrated within our training.” (Susan)

Strategies Degree Qualified Therapists could Employ to Force a Differentiation
- A name change?
- Some believed it may be a useful strategy “People would get used to it. If we clearly now & put a statement out there then the general public will eventually warm to the idea. I think with massage in NZ it’s always going to have that negative connotation of a ‘prostitution.’” (Amelia)
- Likely be a cause of more confusion with the general public “A name change would be fine but, at the end of the day when marketing is done people need to know what it is, & if they were to go to the phone directory or google, they’re not going to put in neuromuscular therapist, or soft tissue therapist, but they will now massage therapist” (Susan)
- A separate professional body (away from MNZ)?
- Yes, a useful strategy (8/9) “I think education of the public is important as well as educating other health professionals. Without the understanding all massage therapists are seen equally regardless of if you have a certificate or a diploma or a degree because they don’t know what we actually do.” (Mary)
- There are no benefits to being a part of MNZ if you have a degree “Promotion of the degree to our own professional body / I think needs to be handled . . . our own body doesn’t specifically recognise us.” (Pearly)
- Benefits to a separate professional body e.g. enable a cohesive unified perspective & stronger collective identity, registration, regulation, ACC accreditation, stronger recognition “I would like to see us registered & regulated & have ACC accreditation. We did the degree & its like anybody with a degree – career, physics, chemistry all can have ACC recognition; they have a body, they have to register. They all have to be deemed fit. I think what we are doing is equally important & we need to be regulated. There hasn’t been, it hasn’t completely homeste, things can go wrong. Having a different body who would regulate us would strengthen our profession as degree therapists & give us recognition in the community & with other health professionals.” (Mary)

Participants perceived that based on the attributes gained in degree based education, a differentiation between degree qualified massage therapists and those that are less qualified was necessary. However there were challenges to differentiation in the unregulated massage therapy industry. A separate professional body was considered a useful strategy to force this differentiation within the market as it may allow degree graduates better representation and may promote degree qualified massage therapists as legitimate health care professionals – both to the public and wider health community. If the massage industry desires to become recognised as a legitimate healthcare modality, supporting educational standards that support best practice is required.
Furthermore, promoting degree qualified massage therapists may be one means to progress professional status and achieve the recognition accorded to other established health professionals.
This study was not performed until the point of saturation. The small sample size meant the findings of this study are not generalizable to the whole population.