What opportunities are available for degree qualified massage therapists within the New Zealand wellness industry?

By Jacqui Parangi & Jo Smith

**Methodology**

**Telephone interviews**: Qualitative approach, semi-structured, 15-25 minutes duration, audio recorded.

**Inclusion criteria were:**

- Must be director/business manager of either a rural based luxurious wellness retreat or urban based wellness centre.
- Must be located outside the Southland, Manawatu and Northland regions (to avoid any conflict of interest).

**Recruitment**: Enquiry through online Yellow pages.

**Information sheets & consent forms**: Full detail of procedures given prior to participant consent.

**Data Analysis**: Transcribed verbatim, thematic analysis.

**Ethics**: Approved by the SIT Human Research Ethics Committee.

**Background**

The wellness industry is expanding at record breaking speed quickly becoming recognised as a global mega-industry. 1 The 2014 Global Wellness Review estimates the size of the global wellness economy to be approximately $3.4 trillion in 2013. 2 Complementary and alternative health therapies (CAM), of which massage is a major component, form an essential foundation for the wellness industry. 3 Within New Zealand, the practice of massage therapy for health and wellness is part of the growing CAM industry and is a popular treatment for a wide range of health conditions. 4 A 2013 study of Bachelor of Therapeutic and Sports Massage (BTSM) graduates indicated many were working within multidisciplinary or wellness settings. These ranged from working within multidisciplinary clinics, alongside a chiropractor or osteopath, to integrating additional CAM modalities alongside massage therapy within a spa environment. 5 The aim of this research project was to explore further potential opportunities for degree qualified massage therapists within the New Zealand wellness industry, to investigate potential wellness employers perceptions of massage, and the future of massage within this paradigm.

**Market for massage**

Many participants stated that both massage and the wellness industry were currently expanding and that growth was expected to continue.

- **Strong therapeutic massage market**
  - Therapeutic massage is currently one of the most requested and popular services within SIT of the businesses questioned.
  - Lucy commented, “Probably the most regular therapy is massage . . . most people are wanting to relax and unwind, then there’s those people who are looking for something a bit more remedial and therapeutic, healing”.
  - Fred agreed saying, “The therapeutic massage will probably be our most popular treatment”.

- **Massage market growth expectation**
  - Predictions for massage and the wellness industry were positive, with massage growth expected to be encouraged by people’s awareness of the benefits it provides.
  - Fred pointed out, “I think it’s all one big growth industry out there at the moment”.
  - John succinctly stated, “The benefits of massage are well researched. There is a greater shift toward natural therapies worldwide, including massage”.

**Employer expectations**

- **Experience and qualifications**
  - Most participants identified a balance of experience and qualifications as an important factor when employing a massage therapist.
  - Kate pointed out, “They do need to have a very good degree of experience and good qualifications for me to actually even look at them in the first place”.

- **A good consultation process**
  - Establishing a good consultation process was an important aspect according to half of the participants. Lucy noted, “There is a consultation form . . . then it’s talking to the person . . . and getting an idea of what they actually want to get out of that treatment . . . as therapists we’re available to meet each person individually”.

- **Client care focus combined with strong people skills**
  - Kate felt client focused holistic care was essential commenting, “Client focus . . . what does this person need holistically? Like what’s the bigger picture for that person’s wellness in their life and how do we learn together to create that balance”.
  - Lucy stated, “You can have the best qualifications you can but unless you can establish that rapport with your clients, you’re not going to get them coming back again”.

- **They need to be trainable**
  - Lucy raised a further issue, “From my experience, sometimes the people who are really well trained aren’t very trainable”.

- **Key message**
  - Kate agreed saying, “I have come across therapists (with the attitude) of my modality is the way forward, my modality is the way”.

**References**


**Results**

- **Provision of specific massage techniques**
  - The type of massage therapy provided by a degree qualified massage therapist was described as being notably treatment specific.
  - Kate pointed out, “When it comes to trigger points, the anatomy awareness, the ability to not just push and shove muscles but to intelligently move fascia, understanding why you’re doing what you’re doing . . . that’s part of extra training that absolutely makes the way in which a person treats”.

- **Training other therapists**
  - Half of the participants agreed that degree qualified massage therapists could fill some type of training role.
  - John commented, “I feel that with a degree you would be able to pass on that training . . . so that you are able to teach a diploma level I guess, with a degree”.
  - Lucy added, “It would depend on how much experience the massage therapist had, if somebody already had a lot of experience I would definitely see them taking more responsibility, be more moving into a training role of other therapists”.

- **Advanced assessment and treatment design**
  - Customizing treatment approaches and a role of designing treatment programs that other less qualified therapists could follow was suggested.
  - Fred pointed out, “I would probably expect that if they were at a Bachelor level in practice that their focus would be on diagnosis and treatment programs, that they would employ a therapist to perform (massage) for them”.

**Potential roles/positions**

- **Need to be multi-skilled**
  - The majority of participants agreed that the need for multi skilled workers was an important factor within the wellness industry.
  - Fred mentioned, “Ideally someone who had a certificate or diploma in Ayurvedic medicine, because it gives them a philosophically framework to understand how the treatments work”.
  - Kate placed importance on administration and sales skills saying, “I need them to have other skill sets, administrative ability . . . computer skills . . . sales and marketing”.

- **Pay level**
  - An inability to pay degree qualified massage therapists what they are worth may make employment a less viable option in some business structures.
  - Fred stated, “If we were expecting massage therapists to hold a Bachelor’s degree, we would probably need to pay them at an acceptable level, which could make the treatments frankly more expensive than they are”.

- **Barriers to employment**
  - **Sub-contracted employment structure**
    - Massage therapists were often sub-contracted and expected to be ‘on call’, possibly presenting inconsistent remuneration for therapists.
    - Clara noted, “We don’t have any massage therapists as full time employees . . . it’s only whenever we have retreats on, that people work”.
  - John added, “We currently contract practitioners to our business. This requires careful planning and advanced booking of treatment”.

- **Limitations**
  - **Small sample size:** findings could not be generalised to the wider population.
  - **Qualitative interviews produce personal and subjective data.**
  - **Degree massage curriculum details were not sent prior to the interview process, therefore assumptions of a degree level therapists’ skills may have been made.”

**Key message**

Overall, this research concluded that there is a definite place for degree qualified massage therapists within the New Zealand wellness industry. Findings demonstrated that having multi-disciplinary skills specific to the wellness industry was an advantage. Other potential perceived roles and positions included training of less qualified massage therapists, diagnosis and advanced assessment of client conditions, and designing treatment programs. However, pay and employment structures may be less attractive. In summary, the future of massage within the expanding wellness paradigm looks promising as this mega-industry and its growing consumer base continues to flourish.