You Can Do It Too! Practices of Elite Sports Massage Therapists

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INTRODUCTION

Are you an aspiring sports massage therapist? In a largely sporting culture such as NZ, is it your aim to work with the All Blacks or at an Olympic Games? Massage therapy (MT) has been used as a recovery modality for athletes since the days of Hippocrates (1). Published studies on sports massage discuss the use of massage therapy to treat a range of conditions. They provide insight into MT and delayed onset of muscle soreness and the effects of “pre and post event MT” (1,3). Despite conflicting evidence to support the benefits of massage therapy, it is recognised as having a role in assisting elite athletes to maintain peak physical condition through manual soft tissue manipulation and rehabilitation of musculoskeletal injuries (2). The intention of this small scale study was to investigate the practices of elite sports massage therapists within NZ. The use of semi-structured interviews provided in-depth qualitative data from three highly successful sports massage therapists. The stories of these successful massage therapists provide valuable insight into their interesting work lives and the challenges and rewards associated with working in this field.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured telephone interviews with sports massage therapists (n=3) throughout NZ during 2015.

Participant inclusion criteria was limited to only therapists who were accredited massage providers for elite athletes by High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ).

Questions related to the massage therapy training, experience, massage and assessment practices, income, expectations, the role of massage therapists in a sports medicine team, and general guidance for up and coming sports massage therapists.

The study was approved by the SIT Human Research Ethics Committee.

RESULTS

Career Influences

Each of the three participants indicated a prior background in sport. They also indicated aspirations to be part of the team and assist athletes in performance.

“I'm always had a passion for sports...I love working with athletes...I really just enjoy being a part of the team” (Mya).

Opportunities and Experiences

Being at the right place at the right time, volunteering with sports teams and knowing the right people and utilising opportunities meant that the participants were able to gain employment and experiences with elite NZ athletes and travel both nationally and internationally.

“I started doing some work with some teams as it often happened...I had another contact a few years later...for me it’s been about contacts and being in the right place at the right time” (Lucy).

“I’ve been to the Netherlands, Glasgow...Tasmania (Australia). And it would be hard to name a place in New Zealand that I have not been, it would be pretty hard” (Carl).

“All over Aussie...Korea, Italy, Slovenia, Holland-France, Switzerland, Singapore” (Mya).

“The Commonwealth Games...which was awesome and then I applied for the Olympics and I got that...and I loved both campaigns” (Lucy).

All three participants made reference to the highly rewarding job satisfaction of working with elite athletes and within the elite sporting community.

Occupational Responsibilities

All participants reported three main responsibilities as practitioners working with elite athletes.

NETWORKING – Working with the rest of the sports medicine team

“...I will always listen and take on board what the physio has said” (Lucy).

You’ve got to take your lead from the sports scientists that you’re working with but you also need to ask the athletes what they want...some athletes don’t want you to touch them and they’re not interested. And other athletes rely on that massage and they have it in their head that they want it within two hours of their race. You know, and that’s part of their little superstitions and their protocols and their routines so you just go with it” (Mya).

“I try to stay in my scope of practice so I have the physios to deal with diagnosis and to deal with stretching and certain assessments” (Carl).

MASSAGE MODALITIES – Pre event, post event recovery, and rehabilitation

“It was pretty much recovery or maintenance massage...you’re not there track side to give assistance because logically it just doesn’t work. Sometimes they do, but mostly they just come back into clinic after 2 3 hours. So the massage is strictly from a recovery point of view” (Lucy).

“They all come in with an injury related issue and I will always listen and take on board what the physio has said...you try to sort things out before they become an issue. And obviously an hour massage is the perfect way to do it because I can feel exactly what’s going on” (Mya).

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – upskilling and learning

“I still love learning things...I did a dry needling course this year and a myofascial course this year” (Mya).

“I have done kinetics, injury prevention and mental sport factors, and I have done manual lymphatic drainage...[and] of course the New Zealand conferences” (Carl).

KEY POINTS

Other points included:

- Income
  
  $60-70 p/hr (HPSNZ)
  
  $50-90 p/hr or up to 60k per annum (in own clinic approximately).

- Athlete : General Public Ratio
  
  30 : 1 (Mya)
  
  30 : 10 (Carl)
  
  20 : 15 (Lucy)

- Barriers

  Availability to travel can often mean less time with family or friends or loss of income in own massage clinic.

- Self Care

  Due to physicality of work it is essential to remain job fit and be in the best possible health for massage.

SUMMARY

This small scale pilot study reports the occupational anecdotes of sports massage therapists in NZ. Findings provide insights into the opportunities, responsibilities, practices and career stages of a sports massage therapist. Such information may assist others who wish to follow in their footsteps.

Career Stages of a Sports Massage Therapist

(Model developed from the pilot study interviews)

1) Contemplation and Education, previous sporting history, aspirations to work with athletes

2) Practice Makes Perfect; obtaining work experience (unpaid) and building on training and experience

3) Big Break; opportunity is presented to work with elite sports team or athletes (paid work and some travel involved)

4) Victory; applying for further employment with elite athletes through clubs or sporting institutes or brands, travel national and international, financial gain

5) Reigning Champion; continual work with elite athletes, owning own clinic – possible employment of staff, less travel, financial stability

References


