Invercargill Based General Practitioners’ Perceptions of Massage Therapy

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Introduction

There has been a significant increase in the use of massage therapy over the last ten years, and it is rated in the top ten most commonly used complementary and alternative therapies. Referral rates from medical practitioners have risen annually, as more scientific research is conducted on the efficacy of massage therapy and the support for integration of massage therapy into conventional healthcare increases. Previous research has identified lack of evidence based research, lack of standardisation of massage therapists (MT’s) and variations of qualification levels as barriers to establishing the role of massage therapy in the conventional healthcare system. Overall there is limited information regarding General Practitioners (GP’s) perceptions and practices of referral specifically to massage therapy. The purpose of this pilot study was to gain baseline findings regarding GP perceptions of massage therapy within the Invercargill region, to further investigate how GP’s view massage therapy in relation to conventional health care; to explore attitudes and barriers to referral, and the role of communication between massage therapists and GPs; and circumstances where referral to massage therapy is given.

Methodology

Face to face, 15 minute semi-structured interviews (n=4)
Thematic analysis – data reported using pseudonyms.
Ethical approval was gained by the Southern Institute of Technology Ethics Committee.

Limitations

Findings cannot be generalised to the GP culture regionally or nationally.
This study only included GP’s attitudes and knowledge about massage therapy. Usage could be considerably different in physicians at different levels and specialties of health care.
The methodology did not suit an exploration of whether certain demographic factors have an influence on GP referral patterns within the region.

Barriers to Referral

Three significant barriers to referral were highlighted: ‘a time factor’, ‘a general lack of knowledge on massage therapy as a whole’, and ‘a lack of understanding of who massage therapists are and what they do’.

Rachel stated:
“I have massage in my head as a sort of continuum of physiotherapy, so often I’ll send people to physio rather than massage ... so if from your point of view you think they shouldn’t be in the same continuum and there should be quite distinct reasons why one should be picked than the other ... I certainly don’t have that clear in my head at all.”

Referral Patterns

‘General health and wellbeing’ and ‘symptoms that related to musculoskeletal dysfunction’ were the conditions GP’s would consider referring patients to massage therapy. Three main ideas were identified regarding areas would encourage further GP referral:

1. ‘Being financially accessible’
2. ‘The overall need for more knowledge and understanding of massage therapy’
3. ‘Credibility of the therapist’

Janet said:
“as long as it wasn’t breaking the bank” she would tend to direct patients to physical therapists (including massage) over other options. She would specify to patients “you do want a trained therapeutic massage therapist, not just someone trained in relaxation massage ... I try and make it obvious to people that there is a difference”.

Communication and Integration

Adequate inter-professional communication between MT’s and GP’s was identified as lacking on a three tier level including: from individual MT’s to GP’s, at an individual practice level, and from the professional massage therapy industry at large. A range of opportunities were suggested by GP’s as methods of improving this lacking communication flow such as: participating in local forums.

Todd commented:
“For me to refer I would like to know what conditions you would like to see, that you can help with. Then when do refer I would like to get feedback regarding what your plan is, what you intend to do, how long for, and what results you would expect to see ... this would help me understand and to know what to expect when I refer”.

Implications for Industry

Ongoing massage therapy research, with disseminated and accessible results, is greatly needed to inform GP’s and assist them with their decision-making process. To encourage appropriate massage therapy referral. For the massage therapy industry, these findings indicate a need for massage therapists, educators, and representing bodies such as Massage New Zealand (MNZ) to further increase awareness, and promote the benefits of massage therapy to GP’s and other health professionals.

Increasing the understanding of massage therapist qualifications and their unique skill set may assist GP’s with appropriate referrals to help better serve the patient.

Discussion

Understanding what GP’s know about massage therapy, whether they refer or not, and what factors are associated with referral patterns, are important issues for developing the massage therapy industry and establishing its role within the conventional healthcare system.

The results demonstrate that, despite the fact most participating GP’s rated a low awareness of massage therapy knowledge and understanding, they generally held positive opinions. Most have or would consider referring to massage therapy in the future.

They identified a need for improved communication levels and information flow with regards to: massage therapy education; massage therapist credentials; conditions which massage therapy may benefit; and massage therapist to GP communication, on an individual patient referral basis.

Key Message

GP’s were open and generally positive about the use of massage therapy. They lacked resources and information regarding massage therapy, therapists qualifications, and skill set which potentially hindered referral practice.