History has shown massage therapy’s transition from traditional orthodox medicine to an unregulated profession, to becoming one of CAM’s growing modalities. Professional bodies are perceived to be the voice of an industry, working towards common goals, standards, professional development and networking within a profession. The professional body representing massage therapists in New Zealand is Massage New Zealand (MNZ). MNZ supported by its professional voluntary membership remains self-funded. Currently over 80% of massage therapists are not members of their national body. Growth in consumer use, training qualifications and practicing massage therapists are not reflected in the small voluntary membership of MNZ. Little research has been done towards understanding the membership needs of massage therapists. The aim of this study was to describe the perceived role of MNZ, the benefits and barriers to membership, and strategies for going forward by qualified massage therapists who are currently practicing but who are not currently members of MNZ.

### Method

This project was a qualitative research study based on an interpretive approach to data collected. Recruitment of four massage therapists were selected on the following inclusion criteria: participants must reside in Auckland, be a current practicing therapist, not currently be members of MNZ, hold a qualification and to provide an understanding of the key themes. The telephone interviews were semi-structured in format to explore participants’ perceptions. The interviews lasted between 20-40 minutes and transcribed non-verbatim. A selection of interview segments, using pseudonyms, provide an understanding of the key themes. This study was approved by the SIT Human Ethics Committee.

### Results

#### The Role of MNZ

- Be the industry voice
- Bring therapists together

  - "Lobbying on behalf of, where the industry as a whole needs to have a voice . . . able to share information and kind of bring therapists together" (Pam).
  - "A great way of networking, getting involved in what was happening" (Lucy).

#### The Benefits of MNZ Membership

- Support systems
- Professional credibility

  - "Going to conferences, learning new techniques, new research, new findings, whatever, it is of benefit" (Lucy).
  - That’s the reason why I joined at the very beginning . . . to get some credibility" (Ann).

#### The Barriers to MNZ Membership

- Financial barriers
- Mandatory continuing professional development
- Not a strong organisation

  - "It’s financial (barrier) as well . . . the time I set up and make money . . . All the training that you had to do as well to keep up, I just didn’t see any point in it" (Ben).
  - "My main barrier is the first aid course . . . it wasn’t worth being a member of MNZ, not enough for me to go to the first aid course" (Ann).
  - "Why I don’t say they’re a strong organisation is that I’ve not heard from them for years, I expect them too, but there’s no contact, no communication, like checking up on who’s out there" (Pam).

### Discussion

All participants had been past members but are not currently members of MNZ. The support the therapists were looking for from MNZ to better their businesses, personal and professional development, was found to be inadequate. The perceived value to cost was not there. The study suggests MNZ address the barriers to MNZ membership, as well as strategies going forward in order to build a stronger professional body and encourage non-members into active participation with their professional body. This study was limited by its small number of participants.