

MEDICAL MASSAGE

Targeted Therapy for Specific Ills

by Linda Sechrist



Sharon Puszko, Ph.D., founder of the Daybreak Geriatric Massage Institute, in Indianapolis, teaches and certifies massage therapists working in assisted living, long-term care and memory care facilities. She relates, “These individuals appreciate not only the physiological benefits of massage but also having a therapist touch and address them by their names. A 105-year-old woman jokes, ‘Now that they’ve figured out how to keep us alive for so long, they don’t know what to do with us. Thank God for massage therapy.’”

Specialty certificate programs such as Puszko’s, representing advanced education and training within a modality qualified as therapeutic massage

and bodywork, are benefitting both massage therapists and clients. Some outcome-based specialty modalities considered as requirements for specific populations such as seniors, athletes, infants and cancer patients and survivors, are referred to as “medical massage”.

The nonprofit National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork provides an accredited, voluntary certification beyond entry-level state licensure. To maintain their status, therapists must complete 24 hours of continuing education and 100 hours of work experience, and pass a criminal background check every two years. The certifying board also approves continuing education providers that

teach specialty techniques, including integrative health care, sports massage and military veteran massage. The result is therapies administered according to a national standard of excellence requisite for therapists working in collaboration with doctors, chiropractors, wellness centers, retirement care communities and other medical settings.

Puszko, an approved provider who founded her service in 2000, offers beginning and advanced weekend workshops for therapists on the complexities of physiological changes and technical skills required to work with geriatric or senior clients. She works from three offices in upscale retirement communities and teaches approved

continuing education curricula throughout the U.S. and internationally.

“Although the skills I teach are not taught in massage school, they are in demand at independent and assisted living facilities where massage is considered a vital aspect of health care,” says Puszko. “Older Americans represent the greatest challenge to massage therapists. For elderly residents, stretching and pulling on delicate skin and joints, as well as pushing one’s elbow into *gluteus maximus* muscles, are unacceptable approaches.” She explains that they might be called upon for a range of needs from helping prepare a 70-year-old marathoner for a race to reducing the stress of an exhausted hospice patient.

Geri Ruane is one of four founding directors of Oncology Massage Alliance, in Austin, Texas. She manages the operations for this nonprofit created in 2011 to help therapists that volunteer to administer complimentary hand and foot massage therapy to cancer patients and caregivers in chemotherapy infusion rooms and prior to radiation treatment. The alliance offers financial assistance to licensed massage therapists for advanced training through approved third-party oncology massage classes and provides hands-on experience with cancer patients.

Ruane defines the essential aspects of an oncology massage therapist’s (OMT) skill set. “A properly trained therapist has an informed understanding of the disease itself and the many ways it can affect the human body; the side effects of cancer treatments, such as medications, surgery, chemotherapy and radiation; and the ability to modify massage techniques in order to adapt accordingly. Our main purpose is to reduce stress and provide emotional support for cancer patients and caregivers in radiation and infusion rooms.”

For example, an OMT will ask a patient about their cancer treatment history, including particulars of related individual health issues, prior to the massage. Hospitals in 35 states and Washington, D.C., now offer massage therapy to individuals during cancer

treatment. MK Brennan, president of the Society for Oncology Massage, created in 2007, in Toledo, Ohio, is a registered nurse with a longtime practice in Charlotte, North Carolina. Brennan observes, “In nursing school, I was taught how to give a back rub, an aspect of patient care once provided by all nurses, but no longer part of a nurse’s education. It now appears that there could be a resurgence of interest in offering massage therapy in hospitals that would encompass more medical aspects and require modified techniques for different patient populations.”

In addition to oncology and geriatric massage, other select massage therapy modalities such as orthopedic, bodywork, Asian techniques and those related to pregnancy, infant and child health care as well as other special needs require advanced education and training.

Before making an appointment with a massage therapist/bodyworker for a specific type of help, inquire about their knowledge, experience, training and continuing education. Ask about additional credentials above entry-level core education that are specific to special needs.

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