

EQUIPPED AND QUALIFIED: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE OF  
WHAT PROFESSIONALISM MEANS TO A REGISTERED MASSAGE THERAPIST

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## **The Road to Pro**

I am studying to become a Registered Massage Therapist. While I aspire to become a healthcare professional, I am not there yet. On my road to pro, I am looking for examples, carefully studying the faces of my instructors for clues as to what that even means. Conversations with my classmates have shown me I am not alone. The trouble is, each of my instructors are as unique and varied in their style, their way of being professionals as we are as students. Yet every one of them seems worthy of the accolade, though they all wear their professionalism differently. It is not as easy as cloning a personality or adopting a set of behaviours. You cannot simply put on their “coat;” it won’t fit you. It’s their coat, their way of wearing the RMT label. They had to find it for themselves and it is uniquely theirs. Now each of us newbies have to find our own way, our own unique style, of being professionals. So we are searching for general principles to guide us in our pursuit. This paper is about that ongoing search.

There is one thing I’d like to explain to the reader by way of scene-setting. When I speak of RMTs I will use terms like “us,” “our” and “we” as if I were already one myself and it may sound like I have forgotten that I am a student and have not yet earned the title. Nothing could be further from the truth and no disrespect is intended. You see, in wrestling with this question of what professionalism means to an RMT, I find it helpful to imagine I have just passed the board exams, received my RMT number and am now ready to start practicing. I am using this paper as an exercise to force me to start thinking like an RMT, artificially stepping into that place now so that I cannot put these decisions off into the future; I am struggling with them now, while still new and barely knowing anything. I do hope you can discern the true spirit of my intentions and forgive what may at first seem like impertinence.

### **Defining Professionalism**

Concrete, satisfying definitions for the terms “professional” and “professionalism” are slippery, elusive, highly subjective. Everyone has their own idea of what it means and what it looks like. Perhaps the strictest definition would limit the scope of “professional” to a person who obtained a post-secondary degree/diploma to enter their respective white-collared, office-bound guild, especially physicians and lawyers and such. Where did these ideas come from? John W. Wade (Dean and Professor of Law, Vanderbilt University School of Law from 1952 to 1971) proffers this historical perspective:

What do we mean when we speak of the learned professions? Ordinarily, we think we are referring to certain common callings of a traditionally dignified character. We think of law, medicine, the ministry and teaching. The concept of learned professions developed during the Middle Ages. It came in with the rise of the universities. They had a faculty of the arts, and a faculty of theology, law and medicine. Teachers, church officials, lawyers and physicians received prolonged formal training, and after they had completed this training they constituted a class apart.<sup>1</sup>

That this was indeed the prevalent thinking of generations past is evidenced in language used in the New York State Census of 1845:

The number of persons in the three learned professions are as follows: number of clergymen 4,399, number of attorneys 3,549, number of physicians and surgeons, 4,610. Total number in

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<sup>1</sup> Wade, John W. *Public Responsibilities Of The Learned Professions*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana Law Review, December 1960), 130

the three professions 12,558... and we have the following amounts paid annually by the people to the members of the three professions for their services...<sup>2</sup>

Note that only three occupations are called “professions.” The same census classifies every other job under the blanket, “Other Occupations.”<sup>3</sup>

In the past, such a conservative paradigm held sway. Today, however, the definition is far more liberal and we apply the term more loosely. It seems that just about anyone can be a “professional” at just about anything. This is because when we use the term to describe anyone, we have in mind a certain demeanour... someone’s on-duty deportment... coupled with impressive skills and considerable knowledge of their field, all adorned by ethical conduct that inspires trust. Defining professionalism this way, any working person can be a professional because it is really not about your formal education or your belonging to an elite guild; it is a code of business conduct.

For Registered Massage Therapists, this broad-brushed, loosely defined way of identifying professionals is probably not helpful because when people call us professionals they are really just lumping us in with everyone else. Its meaning has been watered down or lost altogether... because “professional” no longer means what it once did. Since to be a professional you do not have to be highly trained, well-educated, accountable to a professional association or bound by any specific, objective ethical code, people will not necessarily understand that, in our dictionary, the definition “professional” adheres more closely to its original, more literal sense... we are, indeed, highly trained and well-educated. We are, indeed, accountable to a professional guild and bound by a specific, unambiguous ethical code that we cannot make up as we go along. And yes, that sets us quite apart from all the other non-accredited, unregistered “body workers” out there who do not have anywhere near the same level of training and education that we have, nor are they accountable to a governing body that can audit their practice at any time in the interest of public safety.

Of course, we aim to excel in those other qualities that people have a right to expect from professionals: that hard-to-define “professional” demeanour that tacitly inspires confidence, customer service that goes the extra mile, a client-focused approach where they are all that matters during their appointment with us and a high professional ethic that is demonstrated by everything we do in and out of the clinic.

### **So, what does professionalism mean to a Registered Massage Therapist?**

The following seven aspects of professionalism are very much a rough draft and by no means a complete list. If my paper is chosen and published, my highest ambition for it is that it will stimulate other students and perhaps even some RMTs to add their voices to mine, joining this conversation that is so relevant to every one of us. My aim here is not so much to tell you *what* to think but rather to inspire us all to... *think*.

### **Professionalism means... *Protecting the Public***

At every appointment, the public we serve is placing their health and safety into our hands, quite literally. They have extended to us a sacred trust that we must never break regardless how we may try to justify doing so. It is this promise, this solemn vow, that we make to all patients... and as a community

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<sup>2</sup> Fisher, Redwood *Fisher's National Magazine and Industrial Record*, Vol. III (New York, NY: Redwood Fisher, 1846), 234

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

of healthcare professionals we must hold one another accountable for keeping that vow. Following patterns of clear communication, obtaining consent with understanding and respecting our patients' right to refuse or revoke consent, will help establish trust, keep us out of court and build our business. But if our motives stop there we fall far short as professionals and, more importantly, as human beings. Because, I ask, isn't it really about respect, not only for our patients, but for ourselves? Isn't it about feeling really good about what we do and who we are? To me, it must be about a clear, untroubled conscience... about going to bed every night knowing you did no harm and only good today... that you left people better than you found them and with their – and your – dignity intact.

### **Professionalism means... *Being Accountable***

As I see it, Registered Massage Therapists have a fourfold accountability:

We are accountable **to the public** we serve, for they are our *raison d'être* – the reason we exist – and they pay our wages. They have a right to expect to be treated with respect and fairness at all times and to receive expert care and advice at every visit. We must bear this ever in mind.

We are also accountable **to the College of Massage Therapists of British Columbia** (henceforth referred to as the CMTBC in this paper). There is safety in accountability; the CMTBC keeps us honest and sets us apart from non-registered practitioners. To a large degree, our accountability to them is what gives us the right to call ourselves professionals and invite people to place their health in our hands. For we are held to a higher standard. The CMTBC extends a standing invitation to anyone who wishes to air a complaint, report a breach of etiquette, conflict of interest or any other violation of the CMTBC Code of Ethics to which all RMTs are accountable. With this in mind – and our license at stake – we will think soberly and tread carefully where our patient's rights are concerned. We cannot, for instance, make up new draping standards and procedures as we go, for we are accountable.

We are accountable **to each other** in the RMT community; I feel particularly passionate about this one. We already believe and live this out in school. We take all our classes together, we often study in groups after school, constantly treating and being treated by each other. As we practice charting and doing assessments, we disclose very personal health information to each other. We ever-so-carefully drape each other's bodies, always guarding our classmate's dignity. When a training regimen demands such vulnerability, "trust" and "respect" cease to be mere words. And so early on a necessary trust formed and now an unspoken-yet-palpable code of respect pervades the school atmosphere. I have never once seen any classmate violate this - no one would dare to - for we know that it is this respect that makes our study together *possible*. Together, we have created a culture of honouring one another's dignity and while we appreciate laws, codes and regulations and see their necessity, we have by nature fulfilled the letter of the law because we are upholding the spirit and intent of that beautiful law... because we honestly recognize its value, we absolutely believe in it viscerally, so the code is indelibly written on our hearts with far more weight than that if it were words on paper. To break our code would be to invite condemnation, mistrust and ostracism from the rest of the class, so no one would dare. We hold ourselves accountable to each other. If I knew any classmate was walking too close to the line I would take them aside and call them on it and I know they would do the same for me.

This way of being together as a community does not stop when we graduate school and successfully pass our board exams. Then, more than ever, we need to have each other's backs by not keeping

silence when we see one of our members start practicing or advising out of scope, charging fees that are too inconsistent with their fellows in their region, engaging in a conflict of interest, indulging an attraction to a patient or any other way they might go off the rails. We are all capable of wrongdoing, let's admit that. That's why we need each other. We need to give each other permission to confront when needed, for our own good... for the good of us all.

Finally, we are accountable **to other healthcare providers**. This means consistent, detailed charting that uses language and symbols accessible to other healthcare providers. It means practicing within scope so that we may be taken seriously by other evidence-based healthcare providers. It means we have a commitment to continuous learning. Other providers largely ignore RMTs. They do not often refer their patients to us. We do not enjoy the same acceptance and referral relationships that physiotherapists do. We must provide evidence they cannot ignore and that is the testimonials of our mutual patients. In the meantime, we must continue to speak well of other providers and value their contributions to healthcare even when they do not do the same for us and this, too, is professionalism.

### **Professionalism means... *Client Empowerment***

One of the things that makes us professionals is doing everything we can to reduce the power differential between our clients and ourselves. We need to think about things we can do to help clients feel comfortable and in control of their experience with us. The way we talk to them... respectful, treatment focused, about them and not us, never condescending, emphasizing that this is their treatment and any aspect of it can be stopped or modified at their discretion at any time... this is our first opportunity to reassure them they are in good hands. Holding safe space for them to just be, where they needn't fear our judgement over their body or behaviours, is also empowering. Checking in with them, asking about our pressure and their pain is also reassuring to the client. But it may be the unspoken things that speak the loudest, like draping procedures and the gentle touch that lets their body know it is safe to just relax.

Client empowerment also means not creating a dependency on our "magic hands," as one of my instructors pointed out to me. As healthcare providers we need to be educating our clients about self-care, about injury prevention, correct posture and body mechanics and so on. This, to me, is another mark of a healthcare professional; they do not feel that they hold title to their knowledge but are rather stewards of that powerful information, freely sharing it whenever it can benefit another.

### **Professionalism means... *Staying Within Scope***

Massage therapy today straddles two different worlds, those of clinic and spa. It is at once therapy and luxury, evidence-based and energetic, scientific and spiritual, anatomical and artistic. Those who visit us are both clients and patients. This duality allows us more freedom in our practice than traditional western healthcare providers enjoy. However, it is part of the reason we are not being taken as seriously as we could be. When more conservative healthcare providers hear our mutual patients describe the treatment they received from us, do the modalities and techniques described sound like something based on medical science or does it sound to their ears like quackery? Our contemporaries are not mystics but people of science and nothing else speaks to them. We can explore other healing modalities but only massage therapy belongs in a massage practice. I am aware I just made some people angry, but to them I would ask, isn't it time massage therapy graduated to a new level of acceptance in the medical community? Wouldn't this benefit us all? Just consider it, that's all I ask.

Staying within scope also means you are not employing modalities you are not trained in and certified to practice. Little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. The people who entrust themselves to our care have a right to expect *expert* care, not *experimental* care.

Part of professionalism is humility, that sober-minded acknowledgement of what you truly have and what you do not truly have. We are not counsellors, nutritionists or physiotherapists so let us not play at these things; let us be the real deal and that's what staying within scope is all about.

### **Professionalism means... *Under-Promising and Over-Delivering***

We must not promise to “cure” anything nor set unrealistic expectation as to the results of treatment. It is irresponsible and cruel to get people's hopes up when there are too many other factors at play that are not within our control. Massage therapy is, by nature, something that needs ongoing retreatment over time to experience all the benefits it can offer. I would rather set expectations conservatively in hopes of exceeding them.

### **Professionalism means... *Being Committed to Continuous Learning***

One of the marks of the more original meaning of the term “professional” is being highly educated in your field and staying abreast of changes and developments. You never graduate from being a student. I am reminded of the Zen concept of Shoshin, literally “beginner's mind.” When I was studying Karate, there was a saying on the wall: “Practice with Shoshin, the heart of a beginner.” You never graduate from the need for healthy humility. You can never learn so much that there is not more to learn, especially where people's health is concerned. It is more than refreshing what you learned in college; it is about not being satisfied with being able to help your clients only so much. I believe being a professional – in any field – means being someone who contributes to ongoing research in your field, who strives to elevate not only their own practice but indeed their profession's professionalism! For a student of massage therapy, it means eagerly looking forward to taking additional courses in a variety of different aspects of medical massage and continue expanding our skill set long after we have passed our board exams and are practicing.

### **Professionalism means... *Knowing Your Limitations and Referring to Others***

As healthcare providers, we must never give up on a patient but always work hard to find a solution. If another RMT knows more than we do about our patient's condition, or has more experience treating it, then we owe it to our patients to refer them and encourage them to go. Yes, there is a chance that successful treatment from a colleague might mean losing a patient to them, but what goes around comes around. I want to build a reputation as a patient-first practitioner. I want to be known as someone who sees a patient not as a walking paycheque but rather as a suffering human being who needs the best possible care and if I know someone from whom they may receive better care than I will insist they see them for treatment.

Naturally, this also means referring people to practitioners of other modalities. We need to have the humility to see not only our own personal limitations but also the limitations of massage therapy. Referring patients to other healthcare providers outside the RMT community makes sense, but requires intentionally forging relationships with these professionals. But what better way to be an ambassador for massage therapy? It is hard for them try to ignore us when we are sending business their way!

We need to remember that we are just one part of our patients' personal healthcare "team," standing alongside - never in competition with - the other healthcare professionals they consult. This thought, while humbling, is also freeing; we need not take on more responsibility than to do our part well.

### **The Most Important Thing**

In wrestling with the definition of what professionalism means to a Registered Massage Therapist, I have tried to be thorough, not leaving anything out. I started this essay by pointing out that professionalism has become too loosely defined over the years. It has gotten so anyone can be a professional at anything. I expressed my concern that this is not helping those who truly are professionals; how do we set ourselves apart from imposters and pretenders? More importantly, how does the public know who is worthy of their confidence for this inherently intimate kind of treatment?

My only concern now as I conclude this paper is that, in attempting to be thorough, the most important thing may have been overshadowed by details. It has been difficult to be succinct because I think there are so many "ingredients" to professionalism. So please bear with me as I try to make a final point, the importance of which cannot be overstated. It is simply this: even if we absorb all the education so richly given to us in school, even if we learn every treatment technique that is out there and hone our hands-on skills to a razor's edge, all of this *equips* us but none of it *qualifies* us to place our hands on a person who has come to us for help. There is only one thing that can truly qualify us to do that; we must genuinely *care* about that person. Each of us must take inventory of our own heart, check our motives and make sure they are correct. Am I truly seeking to understand this person's concern and condition? Knowledge and skill in the hands of a person who cares only for his/herself is an ugly, potentially dangerous thing. Unfortunately, character is difficult to teach. It is more caught than taught. I have more to do with a person's background and baggage and how they have dealt with - or not dealt with - the damage they have sustained along life's painful road.

U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt is quoted as saying, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." I like that. To me, it says a lot about what being a professional is all about. I will add to that another quote which, to me, sums it up for Registered Massage Therapists and those of us aspiring to become one. This is a quote from Nina McIntosh's book, *The Educated Heart: Professional Boundaries for Massage Therapists and Bodyworkers*:

When we hear the word "professional," we may think of a clinical atmosphere or a distant and aloof therapist. But professionalism doesn't mean acting stuffy or keeping our clients at arm's length. It simply means that when we're working, our focus is on our clients. We pay attention to them; we're sensitive to their vulnerability. Being professional is just an educated way of being kind.<sup>4</sup>

I saw part of this quote on the wall of the staff room of the student clinic at Okanagan Valley College Massage Therapy where I study. I appreciate it because all of us, as students, are trying to figure out what being a "professional" looks like and how such an aspiration should inform our demeanour as we treat "real" patients from the public. For me, every time I am there, it reminds me that in spite of all I will learn, if I don't have a heart for people, I have no business touching them.

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<sup>4</sup> McIntosh, Nina *The Educated Heart: Professional Boundaries for Massage Therapists and Bodyworkers* (Baltimore, MD: Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, 2011), 1