

# Will California Join the “Cargo Cult” Habit of Massage Regulation?

Keith Eric Grant, PhD

## Abstract

Wording proposed for SB 412 would phase out the important 250 hour tier in terms of a ‘national standard’ of 500 hours. A closer inspection, however, reveals this standard to be based on simulation of a white, middle-class perspective on the appearance of a health care profession. The ‘standard’ is, at best, a mediocre national habit, without the underlying rigors of definition of need or mapping of educational content into capabilities in practice. There are high costs in pursuing this ‘cargo cult’ philosophy. A multitude of California massage schools rely on the 250 hour tier for an economic niche. In return, these schools service the entry to practice needs of a highly diverse California population, including those transferring from other professions, those learning while meeting family and community responsibilities, and those of ethnic, non-English, or poor backgrounds working hard to fulfill their potential. For these groups, the 250 hour tiers meets an important and continuing economic need for rapid entry to massage practice so that their career dreams can continue.

While SB 412, on the face, creates a voluntary certification, when combined with local regulations, it can be anticipated to have the effect of a practice act in many urban regions. California can do far better by keeping the 250 hour tier and working to develop true standards, particularly in light of the very recent formation of the Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards and the current uncertainties of even the definition of medically oriented massage let alone the needs for integrating massage into the U.S. health care system.

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## What a ‘Standard’ Means

*“In the South Seas there is a cargo cult of people. During the war they saw airplanes with lots of good materials, and they want the same thing to happen now. So they’ve arranged to make things like runways, to put fires along the sides of the runways, to make a wooden hut for a man to sit in, with two wooden pieces on his head to be headphones and bars of bamboo sticking out like antennas—he’s the controller—and they wait for the airplanes to land. They’re doing everything right. The form is perfect. It looks exactly the way it looked before. But it doesn’t work. No airplanes land. So I call these things cargo cult science, because they follow all the apparent precepts and forms of scientific investigation, but they’re missing something essential, because the planes don’t land”.—Richard Feynman [5]*

The late physicist Richard Feynman, in one of his classic speeches, coined the phrase “Cargo Cult Science” for practices that adopt the appearance of science but lack the consistency and rigor of science. More recently, ‘cargo cult’ has been used to describe modern practices that imitate the ‘look and feel’ of a desired goal, without doing the hard work behind the original [11].

*“The cargo cult has been used as an analogy to describe certain phenomena in the First World, particularly in the area of business. After any substantial commercial success—whether it is a new model of car, a vacuum cleaner, a toy or a motion picture—there typically arise imitators who produce superficial copies of the original, but with none of the original’s substance. ... The term is also used in the world of software engineering, as “cargo cult programming,” which describes the ritual inclusion of code which may serve no purpose in the program, but is believed to be a workaround for some computer bug”.*

**Much of what is claimed to be a ‘national standard’ for education requirements in massage regulation is, I believe, along the lines of a cargo cult. It is based on imitating the white middle class perception of a health care profession without due attention to the substance and content. Far from meeting the challenge of being a standard, it is at best a mediocre national habit. California has the history and opportunity of not following down this sterile road. The question is whether we continue to have the intellectual integrity that Feynman felt separated science from cargo cult [5]. Will we take the time to develop the substance or follow the empty appearance in the futile pursuit of ersatz professionalism?**

In contrast to the history of what’s been done in the massage profession, the concept of a standard is well-defined in a paper by doctors Wojtczak and Schwarz in a paper looking at minimal essential requirements for global medical education [12].

*“The term ‘standard’ means different things to the different people, and often is used interchangeably with ‘objectives’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘goals’. Sometimes the word is used as a synonym for doing better in some nonspecific way such as “we should improve our standards”, or “the standards are too low”. The dictionary definition of ‘standard’ refers to “something set up and established by authority, custom or general consent as a model, example or rule for the measure of quantity, weight, extent, value, or quality”. ‘Standard’ is also defined as a “criterion, gauge, yardstick, and touchstone” by which judgments or decisions may be made. Thus, the word ‘standard’ refers simultaneously to both ‘model and example’ and ‘criterion or yardstick’ for determining how well one’s performance approximates the designed model. Thus, a standard is both a goal (what should be done) and a measure of progress toward that goal (how well it was done). Therefore to be meaningful, a standard should offer a realistic prospect of evaluation to measure whether anyone actually meets it. Without that, it has no practical value.”*

If California wants credible standards, they need to be based on needs for knowledge, skills, and abilities well-identified as serving public benefit, educational content based on those needs, and well-identified measurable to assess the effectiveness of training in carry-over to practice. The lack of current viable standards is indicated both by the formation this year of the Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards (FSMTB) and the ongoing controversies surrounding requirements for inclusion of massage services in the U.S. health care system. Neither the content of a licensing exam created expressly for public benefit nor the needs of the health care system relative to massage are currently in place.

In a recent article, I searched the medical literature from 1997-2005 for applications of massage of medical interest [6]. Of 213 instances of medical goals addressed by massage, 155 (73%) were systemic rather than tissue-specific (clinical/orthopedic) interventions. Systemic treatment goals included increased well-being, stress and pain management, and improvements in self-image. These “systemic” effects of massage also are well-represented in

the research reported by Tiffany Fields and the Touch Research Institutes (TRI) [5]. The TRI home page highlights observations that massage therapy: facilitates weight gain in preterm infants, reduces stress hormones, alleviates depressive symptoms, reduces pain, improves immune function and alters EEG in the direction of heightened awareness [5]. For this kind of work, the prerequisites are the ability to touch with awareness and to be able to modify the touch based on client response. It's not rocket science, but simple, caring touch. In some instances, the TRI research recruited previously untrained grandmothers to massage infants, noting a health benefit to both provider and recipient. While 27% of medically oriented massage applications were more clinical-orthopedic, adequate training for this work is rarely covered in an initial 500 hour program. This has sparked both the existence continuing education orthopedic massage training and, more recently, an intense controversy on the meaning and credentialing of "medical massage". This controversy is far from being resolved. There is no public benefit to limiting the diversity of those who could provide service to follow an empty 'national standard'.

## Who Gets Hurt

Statistics released in 2004 from the California Office of Finance indicate that the population is 32.4 percent Hispanic or Latino, 46.7 percent white, 6.4 percent Black, 0.5 percent American Indian and Alaska Native, 10.8 percent Asian, 0.3 percent Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, 0.2 percent other individual ethnicities, and 2.7 percent multiracial. While California is known for its technical industries, it also has a jobless rate over 6 percent and a level of families below the poverty level of 10 percent. There is a clear need for the 250 hour tier as a means of giving a substantial segment of our population an economically viable means of entry to practice. This serves the individual students, in terms of career development, and their communities of origin, in terms of availability of services. A single model of massage education ill serves the needs of many in California.

Statistics obtained from data provided by Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals (ABMP) and the BPPVE are revealing. Between the beginning of 2002 and fall of 2004, half again as many career colleges added massage training to their programs as there were startups of dedicated massage schools. Career college programs were only about one-third of all non-degree programs prior to 2002 and such programs increased by 75% over this period. From the hour distribution of new entry programs (Table 1), it appears that new stand-alone massage schools and new career college programs are targeting different student populations. It also is apparent that the region between 301 to 599 hours is a dead-zone for both groups. This alone, should give pause to implementing a single California certification standard within this region of hours.

**Table 1: Relative increases in massage programs for different hour categories in California for 2002–present.**

|                        | First-Level Program Hours |         |         |         |      |
|------------------------|---------------------------|---------|---------|---------|------|
|                        | 250 or less               | 251-300 | 301-499 | 500-599 | 600+ |
| <b>Massage Schools</b> | 80%                       | 10%     | 0%      | 0%      | ~10% |
| <b>Career Colleges</b> | 13%                       | 6%      | 6%      | 6%      | 69%  |

Relatively few stand-alone massage schools in California are accredited and tapping into federally sponsored financial aid. Instead, the vast majority of such schools in California glean their financial solvency by targeting pay-as-you-go students; students often making mid-career transitions [3].

One reason for this is simple; many programs are shorter than the federal financial aid minimums of 600 hours for loans [1] and 720 hours for Pell grants [1, 2]. The U.S. Department of Education approves agencies that accredit schools because accreditation is a big part of the gate-keeping on financial aid. To assure their stability, schools applying for accreditation have to have been in existence for more than two years. Career colleges tend to be veteran players in the financial aid and accreditation end of the marketplace and have now spotted massage training as an attractive market. With career colleges in the financial aid market above 600 hours and stand-alone schools serving a pay-as-you-go niche, there seems limited viability for a 500 hour education. This level is simply too expensive for many and too close to the threshold for financial aid for the rest. Setting a single standard here is reminiscent of the coconut earphones of the cargo cults.

Ultimately, the career schools and community colleges, now that they have found the market, will, seem likely to grow to dominate the market from 600 hour upward. Just as Southwest and Jet Blue have redefined profitability for airlines, careers schools and colleges may do so for massage training near 600 hours and above. Nature has a path of ecological succession after a forest fire, with initial grasses and herbs giving way to shrubs giving way to different stages of trees [9]. Without a separate economic niche, stand-alone massage schools could well become the temporary “shrub phase” of succession in massage education. It is the 250 hour tier that provides the separate niche and serves a different student need.

For the individual practitioner, heavy reliance on financial aid implies that most will enter practice with a significant debt burden. If students are to go this route, the emphasis should be on outcomes carried into practice rather than simply hours on the meter [4, 7]. Such outcomes are not just limited to technique, but include the interpersonal relationship facets of our massage profession [4, 13].

A recent report by the National Center for Educational Statistics summarizes a number of the differences between those entering postsecondary training with adult career experiences and those that might take such training immediately follow secondary schooling [8].

*Not only will the number of adults seeking higher education increase, but adults have different priorities than younger people who have just graduated from high school. The present educational system is only marginally geared towards serving adults with work, family, and community responsibilities. Institutional adaptations will need to be focused around accommodating adult time schedules and educational needs.... The context of learning also differs between adults and children. While children are, for the most part, full-time students and learners, adults are learners on top of other full-time roles. Adults most often will apply this learning immediately to their lives, as opposed to children who are preparing for their future. When adults choose to add this role to their lives, they are constrained by work, family, and school; in contrast, children's boundaries are typically home and school.*

California is a diverse state with a well-established model of providing a diversity of choices in massage education. Stemming in good part from our flexibility, we have long been known as a source of expertise and technique development. We have much to be proud of and much to preserve. There is no need to ignore real needs to pursue a pseudo-science standard. The 250 hour tier is a standard of meeting needs and providing life opportunities that deserves our efforts to insure its preservation.

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