

## **The Emperor Has No Clothes Taking a Critical Look at National Certification Keith Eric Grant, Ph.D., NCTMB**

### ***Introduction***

I believe there are ways in which National Certification can be helpful and also ways in which it can be quite damaging. My writing this piece reflects my belief that the use of the NCTMB should be based on a solid understanding both of what it is and of what it isn't, rather than on adept marketing of the NCTMB to state and local agencies.<sup>1</sup> It also reflects my belief that state and local licensing laws requiring the NCTMB as a sole path for qualifying to practice are contrary both to current educational understanding and to good social policy. From my perspective, the uses for the NCTMB (or similar certifications) should be as a voluntary demonstration of commitment to clients, as a means of meeting employer requirements within the more medically-oriented domains of massage practice, and as a sufficient criterion for enhancing professional portability between states.<sup>2</sup>

Compared to most professions, massage and bodywork are unique in breadth of application and the diversity of skills they draw into play. The foundations of massage are quite simply touch with awareness and positive intent. The basics of application are skills of verbal and nonverbal communication, empathy and rapport, trained processing and awareness of sensory input, and application of learned motor skills to touch and move a client.

As the application changes from the nurturing to the orthopedic, more knowledge of anatomy and assessment become important as do also intervention planning and tracking. As the application interfaces with medical practice and otherwise ill patients, knowledge of medical terminology and protocol, and greater awareness of the implications of conditions and medications become important. In contrast, if we move from basic nurturing to working with those who have experienced severe grief and trauma, understanding of how our touch and presence promotes healing and integration takes the foreground, while details of anatomy and physiology fade from our concerns. What is before us is not a single profession but a continuum of professions across a wide spectrum of application. It is not surprising that practitioners should present a similar diversity of orientations and inherent aptitudes. It is a diversity I believe we should protect within our approach to setting practice requirements for massage.

While there are healthcare applications of massage that require more conceptual knowledge, there are also entry-level applications almost purely based on awareness and touch. There are also domains of working with touch, presence, and rapport that are simply outside of the orientation and perhaps the dreams of those who created the NCTMB, yet are equally valid directions for massage. Attempting to apply an inflexible healthcare oriented bandage to massage governance has resulted not in quality but in *credentialism*, the promotion of formal credentials beyond the training needed to successfully practice and create benefit for clients.

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<sup>1</sup> The NCTMB, for example, customarily has a booth at League of Cities conventions ([http://www.nlc.org/nlc\\_org/site/](http://www.nlc.org/nlc_org/site/))

<sup>2</sup> Those wanting to wade through a more formal presentation with references can find my white paper *Review of Issues in Massage Governance* at [http://www.ramblemuse.com/articles/masg\\_governance\\_rev.pdf](http://www.ramblemuse.com/articles/masg_governance_rev.pdf)

Such credentialism is, unfortunately, not free from side effects. **To propose that an academically oriented standard such as the NCTMB process should be the only path of qualification for practice is to undervalue our diversity.** We do not all live in the same subculture and locale. We are not necessarily all fluent enough in English to use it as a medium of academic pursuit. The availability of positive touch is as important in an inner city neighborhood, a community of immigrants, or a rural area as it is in a suburban or a commerce zone. Credentials, however, may pose significantly higher hurdles to those coming from the former regions than from the latter. The need to recover the costs of pursuing credentials can also spur movement of professionals out of economically disadvantaged or depressed areas, thereby lowering availability of services in those less well-served.

We are not all wired to learn and process information in the same manner. In his book, *The Unschooled Mind*, educational psychologist Howard Gardner captures the dual paradox of those who can successfully take tests without deeper understanding and of those who understand but are not adept at taking tests.

*Those students who exhibit the canonical (in our terms "scholastic") mind are credited with understanding, even when real understanding is limited or absent; many people – including at times the author of this book and his daughter – can pass the test but fail other, perhaps more appropriate and more probing measures of understanding. Less happily, many who are capable of exhibiting significant understanding appear deficient, simply because they cannot readily traffic in the commonly accepted coin of the educational realm.*

Educational pediatrician Mel Levine discusses the substantial diversity in the wiring of our brains in his latest book, *A Mind at a Time*.<sup>3</sup> What becomes clear from Levine's descriptions are that there can be great variations from person to person in abilities to organize information, remember information, and take in sensory information to use for planning motor responses. We do not simply know something and have its use or not know something. The realities of learning, knowing, and using are far more complex. What Levine has essentially done is to provide the neurological basis for Gardner's cognitive observations. What Levine and Gardner advocate together is that we view the ability to score well on tests with less weight and provide other means to evaluate the competency of those less suited to test taking. The neurological and cognitive considerations imply that there are simply cases for which the statistical conclusions of psychometrics don't apply. In a massage context, there is every reason to expect there will be individuals who are highly competent in interpersonal and kinesthetic intelligences, yet fare poorly when forced unnecessarily into the verbal-linguistic paradigm of the academic worlds.

Education can act as a filter as well as a benefit. We will ultimately attract the students that match well to what we explicitly value and discourage those less able to jump our hurdles. We are well advised to ensure that all that we value in practice is equally captured in what we value in assessment and qualifying to practice.

### **History and Prerequisites**

A major impetus for creating the NCTMB was to facilitate greater access for massage in interfacing with the U.S. health care industry, an area in which such certifications are the traffic of the realm. I concur with Whitney Lowe that a certifying agency has more credibility in these

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<sup>3</sup> An excerpt from this book discussing differences in the ways of learning is online at <http://www.allkindsofminds.org/library/excerpts/aMindAtaTime.htm>

realms if, as is the case with NCTMB, it is accredited by the NCCA, the accrediting body of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA — <http://www.noca.org/>). What follows from this is that NCTMB had to match NCCA requirements for a *psychometrically* valid certification exam based on job surveys in order to gain NCCA approval. What also follows is that the NCTMB had to be administered by an independent organization. Both of these requirements have had important side effects.

The NCTMB did not spring into existence based purely on concerns of educational quality and consumer benefit, it came into being with an organizational history and agenda. The NCTMB was created by the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA), which then, under NCCA rules, had to establish the NCTMB board as an independent agency. However, the impact of its AMTA origins was cemented into the structure of prerequisites for sitting for the NCE. The depth of this initial connection is notable in that the AMTA immediately began using the NCTMB as a sufficient qualification criterion for its own membership. The AMTA could not have tolerated less restrictive prerequisites to sit for the NCE and still have taken this course — a course central to ensuring the early economic viability of the NCTMB. Stated more bluntly, the initial NCTMB Board of Directors arbitrarily decided three things: 1) a massage practitioner cannot take the NCE unless she completed at least a 500-hour massage school program; 2) the test would be positioned to state agencies as a fair measure of entry-level skills, therefore being a reasonable measure of qualifications to practice massage; and 3) market the NCE to practitioners and the public as a useful discriminator between those well-qualified and those not so well-qualified to practice massage, independent of any practitioner's choice as to type of massage practice.

Partly as a result of this history, the NCE is not a competency exam open to challenge by any with a reasonable basis for taking and passing it. The NCE test gives an applicant no opportunity to demonstrate techniques or client relations skills. A highly gifted graduate of a 300-hour program isn't even eligible to take the NCE. The NCTMB process leaves the determination of kinesthetic competency to the schools (with highly variable success) while motivating those schools to place heavier stress on memorization of the conceptual material needed to pass the almost redundant NCE. The pattern is quite analogous to the recent fashion in public schools of standardized, statewide skill-testing, with considerable resulting pressure on teachers to "teach to the test."

Ironically, despite the motivation for a massage certification exam to facilitate participation in mainstream health care, the NCE is notably lacking in rigorous concepts of orthopedic assessment, medical terminology, and working with ill patients which might be expected for these pursuits. For these more advanced practices, a voluntary certification with an orthopedic/medical focus would have been of better service while leaving the entry level alone.

While marketed as an entry-level exam, the requirements of the NCTMB are of limited benefit to those entering massage only to do stress-management and spa work. Contrary to persistent beliefs, memorization of its content relevant to passing the NCE is not necessary to protect the public from harm. There are no medical reports or liability insurance statistics showing any pattern of significant harm to clients from lack of practitioner training. To the best of my knowledge, the 500-hour requirements that NCTMB inherited from the AMTA were never based on the time needed to teach specific course content determined by a detailed analysis to be essential to competent practice. The hour requirements rather seem to have been taken from the minimum course length for which a program was eligible for federally guaranteed loans

and grants. As federal minimums have increased (to 720 hours for Perkins grants), schools relying on this assistance have also had to increase their programs lengths.

Also ironic, although it is contrary to efficient management of federal financial assistance, most people learn best in small chunks with real-life experience in between. Requiring more education up-front does not make for better massage practitioners, just more expensive ones. No corporate training manager would demand his or her employees take courses they couldn't use in the near future. Requiring this of massage practitioners just codes bad educational and business practice into law. It does, however, facilitate the taking of a comprehensive exam at the end of an extended period of study.

I believe that the NCTMB suffers from a disconnect of being motivated by healthcare considerations while being aimed at entry-level work. The cause is simple economics. The NCTMB has been organized, marketed, and lobbied as an entry-level certification simply because the pool of those whom it would most benefit (those interested in advanced orthopedic and medically-oriented massage work) was insufficient to sustain the costs of creating and operating NCTMB. The NCE, in fact, is neither fish nor fowl; it lacks the rigor to truly separate those desiring to demonstrate advanced, medically-oriented skills, yet it poses an expensive, largely redundant barrier to entry for those deciding to do entry-level work.

### ***The NCE and Psychometrics***

The idea of the psychometric validity of a test essentially boils down to two concepts: a test should be both *valid* and *reliable*. Validity means that the test measures the area of knowledge that it claims to be measuring. Reliability means that a person sequentially taking different variants of the test would obtain much the same score each time. Although insuring psychometric validity is not as simple as it sounds, it is a well-established process leading to a test for which scores are considered to be defensible in courts of law. Well and good, perhaps, but still not a definitive statement of the limitations of what the NCE actually measures.

Given its format of being a multiple-choice exam, the NCE can only measure the ability of applicants to recognize correct answers to questions within the academic framework of the test. It is well known in educational literature that this is a pattern matching skill that uses the clues and cues inherent in the academic test context along with the ability to successfully commit a multitude of unorganized facts to short term memory. Success on the test indicates exposure to the information and the ability to retrieve it from memory (according to Levine, a hard-wired neurological function) but often has little relationship to the ability to use this information in actual practice. The disconnection from ability to use comes about from two cognitive features of the human mind. First, facts memorized without being well connected to a framework of experience are forgotten quickly. Second, learning is most effective when done in a situation as close to that of actual use as possible.<sup>4</sup> These considerations are less important in professions such as accounting actually requiring near memorization of rules and regulations. Massage, however, is a different kind of craft and practice.

Although the NCE is a valid reflection of responses to job skill surveys, that does not imply that it is free from biases of orientation, question wording, or of sampling and response. As an example of orientation bias, the NCE focuses on questions of anatomy, physiology, basic ethics

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<sup>4</sup> This concept appears in the educational literature under the terms *situated learning* and *situated cognition*.

and business practices, and overt bodywork techniques. In contrast, the NCE does not address conceptual content of verbal and nonverbal communication essential to establishing professional rapport with clients, issues of working with those experiencing grief or trauma, or the entrepreneurial issues of running a one-person business. These are not side issues. Having an understanding in these uncovered areas will have at least as great an impact on the success of those entering the massage profession, as do the areas covered. Even the concept of entry-level is open to interpretation, one definition being the minimum level of training at which a practitioner can consistently provide a benefit to clients, a level that the NCTMB well overshoots. Another definition is the level of training at which a majority of practitioners are entering practice, a definition that can become circular and result in an ever-raising level of entry.

### **Summary**

To sum up, I believe that the NCTMB can be useful to practitioners as a voluntary seal of accomplishment. It also provides for some portability of practice between states, a potential partly ruled out by states such as New York, Maryland, and Nebraska which either have liked another zero at the end of their requirements for round hours or have added extra stipulations such as college requirements.

I differ from the proponents of the NCTMB in viewing that, where included in statutes, it should be a sufficient rather than a necessary requirement. There should always be another path for those less adept at jumping academic hurdles, whether due to early environment or brain wiring. While I have no argument that the NCTMB is psychometrically valid and legally defensible, I don't agree that its underlying assumptions are well formed from an educational perspective. I also believe that the NCTMB was created and applied as a health care oriented bandage to a touch-oriented craft. As such, it was implemented without care for the whole system of possibilities and effects.

Lastly, we as a culture currently love credentials and certificates. Partly, given the diversity of massage methods and successful histories of practice, what the NCTMB is about is a type of gentrification of massage practice. By tying certification of massage to the entry level rather than the advanced level, we in effect move that entry level from being a blue-collar craft into being a white-collar profession and call it gaining credibility. There's something about exclusion in that process that, as a bottom line, has never sat well with me.

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