

Mandating a Massage National Certification Exam (NCE) Sounds Like a Good Idea ... Or Does It?

After a Closer View, Requiring the NCE Just Doesn't Look so Great!

The Sunrise Questionnaire Response (SQR) for AB 1388 has a lot to say about the National Certification for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCTMB). From this response, one would be tempted to conclude that their National Certification Exam (NCE) is universally accepted within the profession as a reliable measure of knowledge and skills for the practice of massage. That would be a wrong conclusion.

The Oct/Nov 2002 issue of *Massage & Bodywork*, the flagship publication of the Associated Bodyworkers and Massage Professionals (ABMP), featured "pro" and "con" articles relative to the NCE. The pro article advanced arguments very similar to statements contained within the SQR. The "con" article contained several points not in the SQR.¹ First, is that, like music and sports, effective and successful massage practice is strongly dependent on good kinesthetic skills, beyond the reach of even the most clever multiple choice exam. Second, even within the conceptual knowledge, there is a wide gap between ability to recognize a correct answer and the ability to use information within actual practice. Third, many with dyslexia or certain types of long term memory deficiencies can practice massage without impairment but fare far worse on academic tests. Finally, given the cultural diversity of the U.S. population, an English-Only test has undue impact on those students of massage having English as a second language.

In October 2003, the professional newspaper *Massage Today* ran an online poll of massage practitioners. The question asked was "Do you think the National Certification Examination for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCETMB) is a reliable tool to evaluate the knowledge and skill of a massage therapist"? Of the 4166 practitioners who responded, only 7.5% responded YES. Many of them qualified their answer in the comments they made. Even allowing for substantial under-sampling of those without a strong opinion, **a massage certification exam considered to be an unreliable assessment of knowledge and skills by over two-thirds of responding practitioners is not on solid ground.**

The Nov/Dec 2003 issue of *Massage Magazine* contains a note to the editor requesting accounts of persons having problems with the processing of their applications or renewals by the NCTMB board. Such accounts are being collected. While states and localities may mandate use of the NCE, the NCTMB board is outside the scope of oversight of such agencies. There is no direct accountability to the public. What limited accountability exists is via NOCA, the National Organization of Accrediting Agencies, a private rather than a public agency. Public mandates need to insure equally public oversight.

The Dec 2003/Jan 2004 issue of *Massage & Bodywork* contains a publisher's note by ABMP president Bob Benson. In it Benson notes that, **while certification exams have their place, the "key word is voluntary" use.** Benson's note is a plea to "preserve flexibility and diversity in the massage profession [and to] respect choices individual practitioners make about types of work and how much work per week they elect to perform".

Please oppose involuntary use of the NCE. It doesn't benefit California practitioners or consumers.

¹ Grant, KE, *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Taking a Critical Look at National Certification*, *Massage & Bodywork*, Oct/Nov 2002. <http://www.rambleuse.com/articles/nctmb_con.pdf>