

The Society for Oncology Massage, Inc. (S4OM)
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This document is provided by the Society for Oncology Massage to support the position that a massage therapist has an ethical duty to refuse to treat a client on grounds of potential harm to either client or therapist. Please address questions to Bruce Hopkins, LMT, NCTMB, Founding Director and Webmaster of the Society for Oncology Massage [webmaster@s4om.org].

A Brief Introduction to the Society for Oncology Massage (S4OM)

The Society for Oncology Massage was founded in 2007 as an all volunteer organization, incorporated in the state of Maine and is recognized as a 501(c)3 charitable organization by the Internal Revenue Service. Its 130 professional members comprise a diverse group of massage therapists practicing in leading cancer centers, general hospitals, oncology clinics, physicians' offices and private practices across the United States-

The Society strongly believes in the importance of advanced training for any therapist working with cancer patients. A small number of experienced therapists have been training massage therapists in this work since 1994. In 2008 the leaders in the field came together with the Society to write extensive standards for instructor qualifications and course content. Currently, twelve instructors are recognized by the Society as qualified to train therapists in the essentials of this specialized care. Over the past 16 years these twelve have trained approximately 12,000 massage therapists to safely and effectively work with persons who have been diagnosed with cancer. They currently offer approximately 40 classes a year across the United States.

The basic framework of the Society is contained in its [Education Standards](#), [Requirements for Membership](#), and [Standards of Practice](#). These, and other documents are available on our website (<http://www.s4om.org>)

S4OM Position on Physician Approval for Massage

Often cancer patients will ask their physicians to approve massage. Physician approval for massage can take two forms: a prescription in which the physician specifies exactly what is to be done and a general authorization which leaves the details to the judgment of the massage practitioner. The practice of massage in the United States is characterized by many theories of action, modes of practice, differing terminologies, risk/benefit tradeoffs and regulatory approaches. It is unreasonable to expect a physician to know all the permutations of massage therapy.

Physicians who prescribe or authorize massage therapy are expecting massage therapists to conform to universal medical norms flowing from the Hippocratic precept, "First of all, do no harm." This precept is a central element of the Standards of Practice or Code of Ethics of the American Massage Therapy Association, The Association of Bodywork and Massage Professionals, the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork and the Society for Oncology Massage. The S4OM Standards are the most encompassing:

- b. Scope of Work. The practitioner shall not provide work outside of his/her education, knowledge and experience.
- d. Right of Refusal. The practitioner shall decline to use any massage technique that the practitioner judges may be detrimental to either client or practitioner.
- e. Consultation. If the practitioner encounters an unfamiliar condition that cannot be adequately evaluated through research, the practitioner shall consult with a knowledgeable professional to determine the best course of action.

h. Health History/Condition. In order to accurately ascertain the client's health and provide for the safest care, the practitioner is responsible for inquiring about the conditions that determine adaptations to massage.

Taken together, these elements may be broadly categorized as an "Obligation of Refusal" to provide service unless the practitioner is confident that no harm will come to the client. Many massage therapists unwittingly put their cancer clients at risk because the therapists do not know what they do not know – that cancer clients require special knowledge and consideration.

Safe and Effective Oncology Massage

Until 1995 nearly all massage schools taught that massage was dangerous for anyone diagnosed with cancer. It is now widely recognized that oncology massage can be safe. What is not widely recognized is that people diagnosed with cancer are often medically frail in unusual ways during treatment and sometimes for the rest of their lives.

S4OM's position is that there is safe and effective massage for everyone diagnosed with cancer, at every stage of the cancer journeys, ***IF*** it is provided by a properly trained therapist. There are many risks to the patient/client and several possible risks to the therapist that must be considered and acted upon.

Risks to the Client

Common cancer related conditions and side effects of treatments are not typically taught in massage school and require consideration and adjustment to the massage. The most common of these include:

Disease Related

Tumor, ascites, bone metastases, nodal enlargement, and deep vein thrombosis.

Surgery Related

Colostomy, urostomy, feeding tube, drains, scarring, blood clots, risk and incidence of lymphedema.

Chemotherapy Related

Thrombocytopenia, leukopenia, hand and foot syndrome, peripheral neuropathy, mucositis, constipation, diarrhea, alopecia, internal ports, catheters and portable pumps.

Radiation Related

Skin reaction, fibrosis, immunosuppression, bone density loss, risk and incidence of lymphedema.

General

Fatigue, nausea, anxiety, anemia and exhaustion.

Risks to the Therapist

In limited circumstances certain chemotherapeutic and radioactive agents may place the therapist or the therapist's unborn fetus at carcinogenic or teratogenic risk.

Therapist Training is Required at Leading Cancer Centers

In view of these risks, specialized knowledge is required of massage therapists employed in oncology work at hospitals across the United States including the major cancer centers of M.D. Anderson (Houston), Sloan Kettering (New York), Johns Hopkins (Baltimore), Dana Farber (Boston), Massachusetts General (Boston) and Moffitt Cancer Center (Tampa).

M.D. Anderson's training is described thusly: "All massages given as part of M. D. Anderson's program are provided by nationally certified massage therapists holding current Texas licenses. Their training requires completion of the center's class on massage for patients with cancer, standard courses required for all patient care providers at the institution, and an orientation to cancer care by the Department of Physical Therapy. Massage therapists must also follow guidelines relating to constraints imposed by patients' diseases and treatment regimens; precautions can involve medications, low platelet or neutrophil counts, bony metastases, and suspicious lumps."#

Similar training opportunities are available outside the hospital environment. Throughout the year numerous S4OM Recognized courses are offered across the United States. For a course to be recognized, both instructor and content must meet S4OM standards. A listing of [Recognized Instructors and Courses](#) may be found on our website.

Conclusion

Cancer is a hugely complex disease with over 200 separate diagnoses. Its treatment can be difficult and long with patients manifesting an array of side effects and complications that differ in scope and intensity from person to person. Consequentially, it is essential that massage therapists working with this diverse population have a minimum of 24 hours of standardized oncology massage training (and are confident in their abilities to use the training effectively). This gives therapists the tools to provide safe, effective massage and “do no harm.”

It is equally essential that massage therapists who do not have specific training in oncology massage (or who are not confident in their abilities to use the training effectively) excuse themselves from providing massage to cancer clients. These clients deserve better from the massage profession.

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