



Oncology Massage Designation: Trained? Specialization? Certified?

Introduction

Oncology massage therapists, the medical community, and the public are confused about the use of the terms “trained,” “specialized,” and “certified” with respect to oncology massage.

Summary

This position paper explains the meaning of:

- A certificate of completion/ being trained in oncology massage
- Specialization in oncology massage
- Certification in oncology massage

Background

For client safety, massage therapists need specialized training before working with anyone who has ever been diagnosed with or treated for cancer. This training teaches a specific body of knowledge and skills based on a fundamental understanding of the ways cancer and cancer treatment affects the mind, emotions, body, and spirit. The basic level of training is a continuing education course incorporating a supervised hands-on element as well as other didactic elements considered essential. (Refer to the S4OM Basic Training Standards position paper for more information.) This course is intended to confer basic competency in skills and knowledge including, but not limited to, pathophysiology of cancer, typical cancer treatments and their side effects, typical cancer surgeries and their effect on the body, pathophysiology of common cancer-related complications, such as deep vein thrombosis, low blood counts, fragile bones, vital organ compromise, and lymphedema, psychosocial effects of cancer and cancer treatment, how to adapt pressure and pace of massage therapy based on knowledge of the aforementioned information.

Training in Oncology Massage

A massage therapist may fairly claim to be “trained in oncology massage” after completing a Foundational Course that confers the above stated competencies and receiving a *certificate of completion*. This certificate does not justify a claim to be “certified in oncology massage.”

Specializing in Oncology Massage

A therapist may fairly claim to “specialize in oncology massage” after:

- Completing a foundational course that confers the above stated competencies
- Completing one or more advanced or complementary courses
- Dedicating a significant part of her/his massage practice to oncology clients.

Being Certified in Oncology Massage

A small number of individual institutions and unregulated organizations offer comprehensive programs that award a certification upon completion. A comprehensive oncology massage certification program will include extensive coursework, practical experience under supervision and a series of examinations. Upon successful completion, a “certificate of achievement in oncology massage” is awarded to attest that the therapist has been fully and carefully evaluated by instructors. This certification is then renewed periodically, typically after completing specified hours and content of continuing education, often including supervision and reassessment.

A therapist may claim to be certified in oncology massage” by a designated organization upon graduation from the prescribed course work. Organizations offer certification to their practitioners as a way to reassure the public of an individual’s qualifications and suitability to practice a particular modality or specialty. The value of certification is dependent on the reputation of the certifying organization and the rigor of the training and evaluation it requires for certification.

It is never appropriate to simply claim to be certified in oncology massage without completion of a comprehensive course of study.