

Common good

National alliance with regional representations can offer the best of both worlds

Emerging developments in the massage therapy profession suggest a surge in cross-Canada collaboration, a pooling of resources and perhaps a more cohesive, potent profession. The Inter-jurisdictional Competency Standards project, headed by the profession's regulatory bodies with input from training colleges and professional associations, is paving the way for a national accreditation process. The Canadian Interdisciplinary Network of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (IN-CAM) holds an exciting conference bringing together CAM disciplines with shared interests. IN-CAM also coordinates the Massage Therapy Research Fund competition, encouraging more research into the efficacy of massage therapy.

Earlier this year, representatives from the provincial associations met under the umbrella of the Canadian Massage Therapist Alliance (CMTA) to discuss joint objectives and initiatives. Ontario and Manitoba, previously absent from the discussions, came to the table for what hopefully will become a more cohesive accord to address the common interests of massage therapists across Canada. A national alliance of provincial associations can pool resources and expertise to address collective interests in public, media and gatekeeper health-care profession relations, government lobbying and negotiating with insurers, while reducing service duplication and maximizing membership value at the regional level.

EXPONENTIAL BENEFITS

A national alliance cannot replace the provincial associations – this was a critical concern brought forward by the non-participating provinces – but the alliance can initiate national public and media relations campaigns, chronicle trends while collecting essential data, and coordinate subject matter experts and spokespersons to leverage our profession's intellectual currency.

Campaign – An alliance can be the common voice for the profession, advocating for massage therapists' interests nationally in relations with government, insurers, gatekeeper health-care disciplines, and the public. Consider the Massage Therapy Association of Manitoba's very effective "Hurts So Good: Time for a Massage Therapist" campaign, or Registered Massage Therapists' Association of British Columbia's partnering with Pain BC to host the Pain Management Conference 2014. A national alliance can build on great ideas like these and co-ordinate the design and sharing of media campaigns across provinces and territories, presenting a united and consistent national message.

Chronicle – Practitioners are interested in policies and ini-



Demonstrating the value of multilevel collaboration in working toward the individual and collective interests of the profession

tiatives that affect them, and are curious of the experiences of colleagues in other provinces and territories. An alliance can present "big picture/cross country" views with regular bulletins and interactive blog. Through more cohesive communications between the provincial associations and utilizing the *Massage Therapy Canada* publication, the alliance can report on trends in the profession, RMT demographics, political advocacy and developments in regulation, research and education. *Massage Therapy Canada* currently provides national news coverage of developments in the profession; it can be leveraged as a vehicle to offer regional content that can be customized per province.

Co-ordinate – To build credibility with government, insurers, gatekeeper health disciplines and the public, practitioners require treatment guidelines (eventually supported by evidence-based practice), trained spokespersons sharing consistent messaging, and other projects best co-ordinated and resourced by a national alliance. Associations can put forward regional thought-leaders as strong candidates for working groups to effectively address jugular issues and plot national strategies.

Working groups already exist in various forms within the profession: FOMTRAC (Federation of Massage Therapy Regulatory Authorities of Canada) on professional accreditation; IN-CAM for research funding and sharing; and the Canadian Council of Massage Therapy Schools (CCMTS) in shaping the way education is delivered. Rather than duplicating efforts, the alliance can strategically partner with these agencies and benefit from shared collaboration.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

RMT associations are in the best position regionally to deliver essential membership services. I suggest RMT associations strengthen their delivery of the following:

1. Member polling – These surveys could pertain to net income, average workload versus desired work capacity, delivery of care/service model used (spa, rehab, private practice, CAM, workplace wellness), rural or urban location, age and years in practice, affiliations and education, and many other factors. The profession's stakeholders need critical data to identify collective needs and better meet challenges. Technology can be used to collect information, collate data and communicate findings and trends valuable to practitioners and all stakeholders. This information can be shared with the other provincial associations through the alliance.
2. Public and media relations – A national alliance can help co-ordinate public and media messaging, but RMT associations need supporting literature and trained spokespersons at the regional level. Each province can utilize public and media relations experts to respond to negative press, while punctuating key tenets of the profession's essential messaging.
3. Professional development – professional development comprises not only the intake of information, but also the cultivation of community. Practitioners working in sole practice often miss opportunities for sharing experiences and debating ideas and policies with colleagues, resulting in a stagnant profession inhibited in innovation and evolution. In order to cultivate context and culture, we need to come together as a community more often – or risk our profession being heavily subjected to (sometimes harmful) influences of foreign bodies. RMT associations can stage virtual symposiums – co-ordinated with localized, in-person gatherings with live-streaming – on critical issues (example: TED.COM). This puts the issues – and the agency to solve them – squarely in the lap of frontline practitioners who experience them daily. The association can then harvest the fruits of the discussion into future actions and policies.
4. Political advocacy – although an alliance can provide national representation in dealings with government, the insurance industry and gatekeeper health-care practitioners, we really need the ongoing legwork and resources best applied at the regional level by the RMT associations. Increasingly, more massage therapists will be employed by non-practitioner managers in corporate or franchise settings. Practitioners worry they will lose autonomy and quality over their work. Associations can build relationships with larger employers and ensure practitioner needs, regulatory standards and working conditions are considered.
5. Partner – RMT provincial associations stand to benefit by partnering with massage therapy organizations nationally and internationally. There are also benefits to partnering with professions with similar interests – chiropractors, naturopathic practitioners, TCM/acupuncture practitioners, physio/occupational therapists, fitness/wellness experts – to pursue common objectives in government policy, insurer negotiations, gatekeeper

health-care professional and public and media relations, and defence against competitors and exploiters.

6. Preferred pricing – provincial associations can take advantage of volume pricing on behalf of their members for products and services of interest, e.g. various forms of insurance, technology hardware and software, publications, legal and business services.

PAYING FOR VALUE

A responsive national alliance requires funding and operational management. While availability of resources is always a concern, defining the tangible benefits of an alliance can consider offer viable ways of financing projects. For example, crowdfunding for specific objectives may be an answer – drawing resources from many varied stakeholders and interested parties to see an objective through.

With benefits of both regional associations and a national alliance stated, practitioners will recognize that the combined force of these two agencies can greatly improve the viability of practice and positive positioning of the profession in general. If we give practitioners a vision of what could be, based on the co-ordinated efforts of a national alliance and regional associations, they would clearly recognize the value and pay for it.



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