

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

of the report titled

Leadership Strategies to Advance Regulation of Massage Therapy in Alberta

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## Executive Summary

The newly incorporated Alberta Support Council for Massage Therapy (ASCMT) sponsored this inquiry. Its interest in this project arose concurrent to its formation, recognizing that the ongoing unregulated practice environment for massage therapy (MT) did not serve the best interest of the Alberta public. The current professional landscape affects a number of stakeholders, including MT educators, consumers of MT services, MT organizations, and massage therapists themselves, both locally and nationally. The ASCMT recognized that mere speculation about why progress toward establishing a regulatory college had been slow was unacceptable. This led the ASCMT to engage as the sponsor organization in support of this research project, designed to elucidate how to advance MT regulation in Alberta. My compulsion to engage with this topic is rooted in thousands of volunteer hours, committed by colleagues and me, spanning multiple decades. Since the launch of this inquiry, significant activity has occurred related to MT regulation in Alberta.

I first became involved on the board of one of the Alberta MT associations in 2002. Since then, I have been committed to seeing MT become a regulated health profession in the province. There have been dedicated efforts to this end, resulting in the 2009 recommendations from the health ministry describing how MT regulations should proceed in Alberta consistent with existing national standards (Alberta Health and Wellness [AHW], Office of the Minister, 2009; see Appendix A). This fuelled my desire to cofound the ASCMT.

I recognized the opportunity for action research (AR) to elucidate reasons for the delay in establishing a regulatory college of MT in Alberta, and what leadership strategies could best be employed to further the cause. Therefore, I initiated this project to explore the main question of: What leadership strategies will be required to advance the process of regulating MT in Alberta? The following subquestions further assisted exploration of the inquiry:

1. What perceptions do stakeholders carry about the regulation of MT in Alberta?
2. What are the obstacles to moving forward with MT regulation?
3. What organizational supports need to be in place to advance MT regulation in Alberta?

Relevant areas in the literature were reviewed to support topics related to my research questions. Literature related to professionalization of MT and the effect of regulation on MT professionalization was of interest. Professionalization of MT fell into two general groups: (a) those who recognized MT as a complementary and alternative healthcare practice and (b) those who viewed it as a health profession. In Canada, with its presence in various provincial healthcare systems, the tendency has been to define MT as a health profession (Grant et al., 2008). MT has been on a professionalization trajectory occurring at different rates across jurisdictions (Gowan-Moody & Baskwill, 2006), and shows consistency with the professionalization activities of other health disciplines (Richardson, 1999; Taub, Allegrante, Barry, & Sakagami, 2009). Further, the process of regulating marks the apex of professionalization activities (Gowan-Moody & Baskwill, 2006), despite occasional unrealistic expectations of heightened professional status (Fournier & Reeves, 2012; Timmons, 2011).

The topic of collaboration was also explored. Recognizing that the literature often imparts a vague definition (Jang, Feiock, & Saitgalina, 2016), I described collaboration specific to the

context of this project. Collaboration among MT organizations has characteristics of an informal self-directed collaboration (Gazley, 2008; Golonka, 2013; Jang et al., 2016). One main risk of collaborating is mission drift, while a great benefit is the opportunity to accomplish goals that would be challenging to attain independently. I also discovered that collaborative relationships work best when there are commonalities that link the involved organizations, trust is present among the groups, and the structure of the interaction is jointly developed (Atouba, 2016; Golonka, 2013; Linden, 2003; Sharma & Kearins, 2011; Tsasis, 2009).

In recognition that behaviour can change while under observation, I reviewed literature on this topic as well. The premise is that when one's actions are being observed, increased compliance with expected behaviour occurs (McCambridge, Witton, & Elbourne, 2014; Wickström & Bendix, 2000). This concept linked directly to the study conclusions.

The AR methodology was chosen to suitably explore the research questions in this investigation. The MT regulatory environment in Alberta is diverse and sometimes volatile. Thus, there is great value in providing the opportunity to gain shared understanding by encouraging contribution of diverse perspectives and reflection on any existing misconceptions: This could result in shared understanding of a challenge (Stringer, 2014). I explored these questions by requesting key informants share their expert insights and experiences related to the research topic (Glesne, 2016).

Data collection occurred via qualitative inquiry methods from an appreciative stance. A virtual focus group and interviews informed an electronic survey to ensure opportunity for those geographically disbursed the ability to contribute to the project. The intention was to seek out diverse and knowledgeable insights into the organizational challenge under investigation. Royal Roads University (2011) *Research Ethics Policy* and the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014) guided the research process.

Data obtained from the focus group and interviews shaped the survey questions. To capitalize on the opportunity for co-creation of knowledge, participants were encouraged to provide additional comments at the end of the focus group, interviews, and the survey. Six individuals representing two of the four participant groups contributed to the focus group; however, only five individuals made comments. Four of those six expanded their responses during interviews. The survey consisted of 18 questions, with six being open ended to allow further expression of their thoughts and opinions about MT regulation. All identified stakeholder groups contributed to the survey data, with 19 respondents participating.

As the investigation proceeded, the following five main findings emerged from the data:

1. There is an appetite for regulating MT in Alberta.
2. Market share protection is the greatest obstacle to regulation of MT in Alberta.
3. Maintaining focus on the public best interest rather than the profession is a challenge.
4. Inclusive consultation and collaboration is essential to advancing the regulatory process.
5. Maintaining competency standards for the profession is a priority as regulation proceeds.

The methods generated rich information from the participants, which was insightful and when positioned in the literature provided the basis for the study conclusions. Based on my review of the themes and findings of this investigation, and the malleable context of the research project, I formed the following conclusions:

1. MT associations' competing priorities challenge the process of regulating MT in Alberta.
2. The unclear definition of "massage therapist" in Alberta encumbers the process of regulating.
3. Alberta MT regulation must occur in the context of the larger health professional landscape.
4. The process of conducting the research inspired action.

As mentioned earlier, there recently has been a wave of activity related to MT regulation in Alberta. The ASCMT is now in a position to focus on stewarding the MT regulatory process. I developed the following recommendations with this adapted focus in mind:

1. Maintain and improve the ASCMT's public profile as a leading authority on MT regulation in Alberta.
2. Develop an engagement strategy to connect with massage therapists currently practising in Alberta to begin a shift in culture from service industry to health professionals.
3. Engage with the health regulators in Alberta.

Three of the MT associations in Alberta have exclusively completed the recent work related to MT regulation requirements. Thus, the ASCMT continues to evolve in their role of supporting the regulatory process in this complex environment. Anheier (2000) argued that nonprofit organizations have multiple bottom lines that are difficult to prioritize and contribute to "the law of nonprofit complexity" (p. 188). I assert this description offers insight into the professional MT organizations, as their missions are obligated in many, often conflicting, directions.

The ASCMT recognizes the importance of remaining adaptive and indicated interest in refocusing the organization's activities given the recent shift in the regulatory landscape. They must utilize strategies for effective change when implementing the study recommendations within the unique and complex environment of MT in Alberta. Currently, a planning session is being coordinated for the board to review its direction in the context of this report. In the interim, the ASCMT continues to nurture relationships with all stakeholders affected by MT regulation in Alberta.

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## **Dedication**

To those who have volunteered countless hours in support and pursuit of establishing massage therapy as a regulated health profession in Alberta and across the country.