

It's been more than six months since the Massage Therapy Body of Knowledge (MTBOK) was unveiled at the Highlighting Massage Therapy in CIM Research Conference sponsored by the Massage Therapy Foundation in Seattle last May. Since this document holds so much promise for the massage therapy profession, this a good time to do a quick review of how it came to be and to ensure that it achieves its promise. The MTBOK was designed as a living document that informs all of the domains of massage therapy: practice, accreditation, research, certification, education, and licensure.

Simply stated, a profession's body of knowledge documentation articulates what a member of that profession is expected to know and be able to do. Often a body of knowledge document is built and maintained by the association that represents that field. Massage therapy has the joys and frustrations of multiple

associations that represent its domains and practitioners. The existence of multiple stakeholders is befitting of a profession that is so broad and diverse, but it can make profession-wide consistency more difficult.

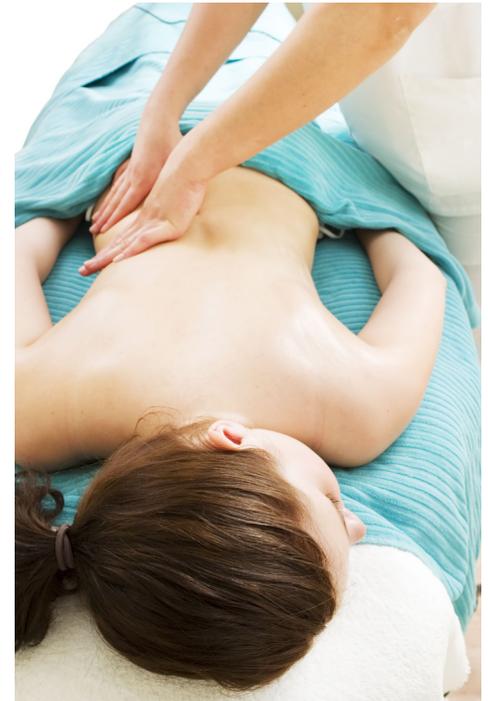
A few years back a small group of organizations began to solicit participation in the joint development of a project to document the massage therapy body of knowledge. Ultimately five of the major organizations agreed to commit the time, finances, and effort to the project. These organizations are:

- American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA)
- Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals (ABMP)
- Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards (FSMTB)
- Massage Therapy Foundation (MTF)
- National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB)

In 2009 these organizations jointly designed an approach and initiated a project to have the MTBOK built by a group of volunteers selected from a nationwide call. The project was to take approximately a year, was to be as inclusive of stakeholders as possible, and was to be independent of control by any stakeholder organization. After almost a year of work, including outreach to the profession via stakeholder input sessions and meetings, as well as two public drafts issued for stakeholder comments via a simple online comment system, Version 1 of the MTBOK was issued on May 15, 2010.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE MTBOK DOCUMENT

The MTBOK document itself consists of three main sections. The first section, a *Description of the Field* and *Scope of Practice* describes in general what is done in the field of massage therapy. This section, describes the full range of work done by massage therapists. The second section presents the competencies an entry-level



massage therapist should possess including knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA). Note that this section is limited to the KSAs required of an *entry-level* therapist and does not address competencies required for work that requires additional training or certification. The third section is a list of terms either specific to massage therapy or which have special meaning within massage therapy. In addition to these main sections there is also a preamble and a vision statement, an appendix of muscles, a bibliography, and an acknowledgement for support to the task force.

CLARIFICATIONS NEEDED

Several issues surrounding the MTBOK arose very quickly and have been difficult to clarify with the profession. A discussion of some of these themes follows:

Legal authority. The MTBOK itself does not have any legal authority. This authority is held by the jurisdictions in which a massage therapist practices. If a jurisdiction determines that it will

authorize massage therapists to do something that is not in the MTBOK scope of practice (or is in the scope of practice section), it has the authority to do so. Over time the MTBOK will evolve with the profession. It is intended to be a source of information to those who make laws and regulations and could be referenced by those organizations. Therefore, it serves the profession for therapists to be familiar with the MTBOK contents and provide suggestions and comments to be considered for updates. Such feedback is welcome and may be sent via email to mtbok_comments@mtbok.org.

Living, not static. The philosophy behind the MTBOK is that it is to be a living document. That is, it is intended to change and grow with the needs of the profession. If something in the MTBOK is not correct, has been made irrelevant or is not up to date, changes will be made to keep it accurate and representative. Although the updating process is managed by the steward organizations it is incumbent on all members of the massage therapy profession to ensure that it is updated to maintain its accuracy and relevancy.

Leading, not following. Knowledge grows at a tremendous rate in today's society. Since the MTBOK is designed to be a document that informs and guides the domains of massage therapy, it should represent the *current thinking* of what a massage therapist should know and be able to do—without regard to what is being taught to students at the time. The MTBOK needs to be a single source where domains go to help determine changes they may need to make internally. In the same way, as domains discover new trends they help ensure these are reflected in the MTBOK. This will ultimately help ensure profession-wide consistency over time. For example, schools should monitor the MTBOK and offer suggestions for changes based on new information they have and also use it as one of their sources to feed into the curricula design.

Focus of the MTBOK sections. It is important to understand the intent and applicability of each of the MTBOK sections. As explained above, both



the Description of the Field and the Scope of Practice sections are meant to apply broadly to the diversity that is found throughout the profession, although they do not attempt to describe everything a massage therapist might do. To try to do so would not be feasible. However, these sections do state that some additional training and/or authorizations may be necessary for some of the work included, and that other specialties may be practiced with appropriate training and authorization.

The competencies section includes knowledge, skills, and abilities that should be possessed by an entry-level massage therapist only. It is entirely possible that some massage therapists may not have received training in all of the areas (this is particularly true in the area of therapeutic relationships which includes some new science). But this is likely to always be true if the MTBOK is relevant because many therapists have not been to a massage school in years, and the teaching is not consistent in all schools. Massage therapists would not be penalized for not knowing these sections—the MTBOK isn't used for disciplinary actions. Instead, it represents an opportunity for massage therapists to review areas they can consider studying through continuing education.

CURRENT STATUS

The MTBOK is formally completed and Version 1 is freely available. The MTBOK process is now paused so the profession can absorb, discuss, and react to this inaugural document. Comments and suggestions are being accepted and monitored, and these will form the timeline for and approach to ongoing

maintenance. The steward organizations are looking to determine what changes practitioners feel are necessary, and how strongly they feel about them.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

All **practitioners**, including students who are future practitioners, should be familiar with the MTBOK and what it includes. It should be read with the understanding that it is a profession-wide document, and suggestions and comments are welcome.

All **domains** (Practice, Accreditation, Research, Certification, Education, and Licensure) should review the MTBOK to look for any inconsistencies with their operation, and discuss possible ways to improve the MTBOK, and how it might be more closely integrated within their domain. For example, the **education domain** should begin to integrate the MTBOK into curricula. One way to start might be by downloading the [MTBOK checklist](http://www.mtbok.org/downloads/Checklist_of_KSAs_for_schools_v1.pdf) available on the MTBOK website: http://www.mtbok.org/downloads/Checklist_of_KSAs_for_schools_v1.pdf.

This is a simple tool that allows a school to go through the MTBOK list of KSAs and decide how well its curriculum addresses each. Most schools will identify a few areas that they don't address completely, and these could then be passed on for insertion into the curriculum development process.

Continuing Education providers can use this tool to identify opportunities for new courses. **Practitioners** might also wish to use this tool to identify subjects they could add to their upcoming continuing education coursework.

Researchers should look for opportunities to link the results of their work to applicable areas in the MTBOK, and may wish also to identify areas of the MTBOK that should be supported by additional research as a means of identifying their potential projects.

Finally, remember that the MTBOK belongs to you: a practitioner in the massage therapy profession. It's your duty to help ensure that it continues to live and grow with the profession. Keep those suggestions coming to MTBOK_Comments@mtbok.org.