



An Interview with Bryn Sumpton by Bruce McKinnon '90

Have you ever wondered what is being taught in massage schools across Canada or why it matters? Perhaps you've been frustrated looking for evidence about how massage therapy works and what the effects are? Maybe you have a burning question about massage that you want to research?

Bryn Sumpton has answers to some of these questions; he can describe first-hand the difficulties and challenges related to researching massage therapy. He joined S-C Pro Clinics as Vice-President in February 2018. I met with him to learn more about his research interests, past and present.

Bryn entered the healthcare field with a BSc in Nursing in 2011. Shortly thereafter he moved into the world of massage therapy, but not as a massage therapist. He became the Executive Director & CEO of the Registered Massage Therapist Association of Ontario (RMTAO), where he served until late 2013. Through his work at the RMTAO, he developed relationships with massage therapists and industry stakeholders, was immersed in the profession's issues, and very importantly, he became connected to the research world.



When Bryn joined the RMTAO, Amanda Baskwill was the Board Chair. In addition to her association commitments, Amanda was also the Coordinator of the massage therapy program at Humber College and a keen researcher into massage therapy. Bryn became an instructor at Humber; through this association he has collaborated with Amanda in her research, a collaboration that continues today. They are currently working on an overview of massage therapy education in Canada.

Researching An Overview of Massage Therapy Education in Canada: Who Is Teaching What and Where? Why Should We Care?

There have been many changes in the massage therapy education world in the past few years. Some, because of the competencies document, some are due to the accreditation process, and some have arisen out of the fact that educational systems themselves are changing - we see a lot more online courses, for example. In a way, many of these pressures and changes have been imposed onto massage therapy, and the programs, presumably, will have to react to that.

From a research point of view, one way we can investigate what is being taught is to take a snapshot of a certain time period and then later, take another snapshot and look at the comparison. That's what this is really about - looking at what programs are like now and what schools are thinking about. We're talking to instructors who are active in curriculum development, we're talking to the

people who run programs, to coordinators, to people who own schools. We've also communicated with regulators and others who are quasi-involved in controlling the big picture regarding schools. In short, we're asking them to talk about what they think is happening in massage therapy education today, what they anticipate the challenges of the future are, and how they're planning for them.

The methodology for our study includes a structured interview (usually over the phone) which involves working from a set of questions. The interviewer can then delve more deeply into particular issues as they arise, through follow-up questions. We are most concerned with the big picture, rather than the minute details of a specific course.

One of the things that's nice about our approach is that it's not just about looking at the concerns or issues that are coming up, but also the innovations that people are discovering in order to implement the challenges. This new information could then be used by other programs and going forward, I hope this will result in positive information sharing.

Researching the Efficacy of Massage Therapy

Examining the efficacy of Massage Therapy, is very difficult to study. Because massage includes a psychological 'feel-good' component, has a whole-body physiological component, and also includes a location-specific component, research of efficacy is very challenging. All of these factors come into play... How do we know what works? Or how it works?

As an example: We attempted a small study at the Belleville S-C Clinic, working with a small group of participants with PTSD – people from the military and police who, through their work, had been exposed to violent or life-threatening situations.

We wanted to see if adding massage therapy in addition to the other care they were receiving would have a positive outcome on their sleep. We learned anecdotally that it did help with sleep, but when it came time to try and measure it, we had a real challenge. The participants would tell us they felt there was a difference in the quality of their sleep, but measuring the change was very difficult.

When we examined the outcomes, there were parts of some of the measures that showed some positive change, parts that started getting worse, and parts that showed no change... subjectively there was a desirable change, but the measurement was really tricky. We encounter this whenever we're looking at the generalized or systemic effects of massage therapy: the results are difficult to quantify and very difficult to measure.



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The Power of Money: Funding Issues

Funding is a perennial problem – large studies are incredibly expensive to do. We need to provide funding for the specialists involved and for those providing the treatments. The whole process of getting it through from beginning to end – working with research ethics boards – all requires a huge financial investment in addition to the time and effort we put in.

There is recognition within the profession of the need for more research. When we survey stakeholders, the response is overwhelmingly “yes” to needing more research and funding for research. Research can be used as an important measure of our success and the ramifications are important to consider. For example, is massage therapy included in certain programs of care at the WSIB? Will companies continue to include massage therapy as part of the health benefits coverage they offer employees? Having a solid research base puts some weight behind these considerations.

Research and Academic Challenges: The “Brain Drain”

A related issue that massage therapy faces is academic: in many other health care fields there is a stream of the profession that progresses on to a Masters or PhD level of education. Because of this, there is an academic support system that is inherently in place to help fund their research, nourish the development of their research skills, and help them to publish. Because this is not part of our culture, it’s left up to individuals in the profession to push ahead through their own will and effort. In Canada, we might have 10 or 20 people who are active as RMTs and engaged in research at this level... it’s a very small group and they’re doing it largely on their own.

Another concern is ‘brain drain.’ These people have a lot of initiative. They want to go on and pursue their Masters, but they can’t do it in massage therapy, so their research may be only tangentially related to massage. Sometimes what happens is they find something else that interests them and they move away from massage altogether. This poses a major challenge for us to both develop and retain a research base in our profession.

Research: In Schools

We also have an interest in looking at how evidence-based and evidence-informed practice can be incorporated and embraced by MT programs and how this challenges programs to change – and how the schools are innovating to evolve.

Students in some schools are participating in research – whether a case study or literature review, it’s wonderful that they are connecting research to practice as part of the curriculum. The more this happens, the more we can engage the future leaders of the profession to be not only research literate, but capable of participating in and conducting research. This could be our next big step – the move from research literacy to active research.

Examining the evidence can be challenging and frustrating for students. It often presents negative findings, or it doesn’t align with how they understand what they’re doing, and none of it is there in sufficient quantity. One of the inherent problems we face is that much of the ‘dogmatic knowledge’ that MTs take for granted and is taught in school programs comes out of a history of a certain understanding of the body – how it works and how it responds to techniques or treatments. This understanding is sometimes wrong, sometimes it’s right but its hard to know why... But we press on in the hope that we can both deepen our understanding and strengthen our profession.

Speaking with Bryn was a real eye-opener for me. As you reflect on these issues, you might ask yourself: Am I the future researcher, innovator or leader that our profession needs?

We want you!

As a side-note: While at the RMTAO, Bryn participated in the development of the Canadian Massage Therapy Council for Accreditation (CMTCA), the body for accreditation of massage therapy education programs in Canada. Accreditation involves the approval by an independent agency that an education program meets a pre-defined standard. There are many advantages to accreditation, including:

- **benefits to patients:** through the provision of a consistent level of service nationally
- **benefits to MTs:** by facilitating easier interprovincial mobility for practitioners
- **benefits to students:** by providing objective information about program quality providing training programs with improved access to educational resources

This initiative is still in its infancy – in February of 2018, the Okanagan Valley College of Massage Therapy in B.C. became the first school in Canada to receive national accreditation. Sutherland-Chan is one of many schools seeking this designation and our process is on going... This initiative will make us stronger nationally and it also relates to the research on what is being taught across the country.