

Within Reach: The quest for information and research

Earlier this year, Dr Kathrin Schmieder attended the Within Reach Virtual Symposium presented by Healwell on behalf of Massage & Myotherapy Australia. These are her takeaways from the event.



Dr Kathrin Schmieder

Research and information literacy are essential for the future of our profession. This was the key message of the online symposium 'Within Reach: The Quest for Information and Research' hosted by Healwell on February 25-26, 2023. Gold Sponsor Massage & Myotherapy Australia joined with other massage organisations to support this conference.

Symposium speakers included researchers and research communicators who have been advocating for and working in massage research and research communication for many years, such as Ann Blair Kennedy, Niki Munk and Ruth Werner to name just a few. Healwell Co-founder and Executive Director Cal Cates moderated the symposium together with Education Coordinator Corey Rivera.

Keynote speaker Dr Niki Munk gave an overview of massage research in North America from the 1990s until today, which showed how much the body of massage research has grown, but also that the need remains for more funding of large-scale quality studies that explore the mechanisms and efficacy of massage. Munk reflected on the challenges of obtaining grants, the interdisciplinarity of the field, questions around research methodology, and on the distribution of knowledge. She showed that, despite roadblocks and difficulties, massage research is a growing discipline, and she is hopeful it will attract more resources for quality research.

Munk's mission is to make massage more accessible which is one of the reasons why she got involved in massage research. She aims to elevate the quality and quantity of research studies and suggested that one way of increasing access would be to place massage therapy under the umbrella of healthcare.

In her talk, Dr Donelda Gowan focused on challenges faced in massage research. She echoed issues mentioned by Niki Munk, such as raising funds, the pressure to publish and

small sample sizes. The latter is common in massage research, partly due to lack of funding. Small sample sizes can invalidate studies, and even if they don't, they still lack the weight and impact of large-scale studies – one of the many issues we face.

Gowan also highlighted that learning and research are essential to the continuing relevance of the massage industry. It is therefore essential to embrace the challenges, said Gowan – a perspective that was shared by several conference presenters. She asked pertinent questions, such as: What are the mechanisms to support researchers? What is the path to promoting practitioners who are interested in academic research? How can we help to move the profession forward as a valued modality of health care and as a career option? Do we need an international task force for massage research? Her reflections allowed listeners to consider the state and future of massage research, and might help to define the path we, as an industry, create and shape.

A major topic of the symposium was the difficulties involved for massage practitioners getting involved in research, partly as it is challenging to make space for time-consuming (and often unpaid) research, especially for therapists who work in multiple clinics, who have back-to-back clients, or who juggle work and family commitments. Other obstacles encountered during the conference include the pay walls of peer-reviewed journal articles and the high costs involved in attending scientific conferences. In addition, research literacy among therapists is not self-evident. According to Healwell Executive Director Cal Cates, Healwell Operations Director Kerry Jordan, and other presenters, this demonstrates that education standards need to be elevated and competencies built.

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insight into the treatment room, helps in designing studies, and bridges the gap between practice and research. There is no doubt that we should all aim to become more research literate. We have to learn how to better search, read and comprehend information, and how to apply it in our work. Then we can all make a positive impact and move the massage industry forward.

The symposium included several sessions aimed at improving research skills and confidence. For instance, Dr Ann Blair Kennedy explained the process of identifying gaps in research, including formulating questions and searching for answers. She compared the process with learning a new language, so that we can develop a fuller understanding of what we do, obtain better outcomes, and improve clients' understanding of their bodies and treatment options. She highlighted the importance of evidence-based practice. According to her, this is where the overlap is between research, clinical experience of therapists, and the preferences of people who receive manual treatments.

Applicable research is, of course, not reduced to the field of massage, as there exists an expansive body of literature across several disciplines that is entirely relevant to our field. Massage therapist Cathy Ryan spoke about interdisciplinarity in relation to her attempts to improve her practice and to help people. She recognised that she wanted to improve. To do so, she needed to understand better what was going on, and she later shared her knowledge beyond her treatment room. Her book 'Traumatic Scar Tissue Management: Principles and Practice for Manual Therapy' is proof that it is possible to get involved in research without a bachelor's, master's, or PhD degree. Echoing other speakers, she noted that the first step is to gain research literacy.

Presenter Dr Lauren Fowler delved into this topic, explaining how to read and interpret statistics. She reminded conference

participants how statistical data can be misleading, especially if taken out of the context in which a study was conducted. Thus, we must think critically about data that is expressed as facts, as information can be misrepresented, even if this is not the author's intention. Critical thinking is an essential skill in dealing with the large body of online information with which we are confronted every day. This is especially important if we draw on this information in our clinical work.

Librarians Taylor Xiao and Carrie Byrd also spoke about the importance of critical thinking in searching, locating and using information. Xiao focused on the concept of authority, which is always constructed and contextual. Byrd referred to the significance of bias, how to evaluate sources and how to stay current. She reminded the listener that finding and using credible information is an essential part of information literacy, which we, which, as massage therapists, we must strive for if we want to be perceived as professionals.

Ruth Werner and Nancy Steinberg, both experts in knowledge dissemination, explained the process of creating content that makes research more accessible, especially highly specialised or technical information. Werner said it is her job as a science communicator to refer to trusted experts and reliable sources. As part of this process, she has become a trusted expert herself. Many of us know her book 'A Massage Therapist's Guide to Pathology' or have attended one of her webinars. Steinberg reminded us that our current understanding and knowledge will eventually change. This means that lifelong learning is a professional requirement that helps to bolster the reputation and sustainability of our industry.

The symposium also highlighted several controversies that have long existed in the massage industry. These include (but are not limited to) the variety of interpretations of the word 'massage' (which has a sexual connotation for some people), the difference between

clinical and recreational massage, and whether massage is a personal service or a healthcare profession.

Healwell members Cal Cates and Corey Rivera focussed on the latter discourse. They suggested that there is a potential for harm because massage therapists interact with the complex organism of the human, often one who is suffering. A healthcare model can reduce this risk. According to Cates, the poor health of our [western] population is another reason why massage therapists should work in the context of healthcare. Both concluded that if we want to be seen as healthcare professionals, we must invest in research and raise educational standards.

All speakers concluded that massage therapists can't ignore research, and that we must invest in it if we want our profession to be relevant in the future. Not all massage therapists need to work as academic researchers, but all must become more research literate, since therapists have a responsibility towards people who trust their knowledge and skills. It is not enough simply to apply in the treatment room massage techniques learned during training. It is essential to reflect critically about applied and shared information, use reliable sources and engage in research if possible.

Research literacy and engagement are part of the professionalism and sustainability of our industry. It will also help policymakers and medical professionals to take our work more seriously. As Cathy Ryan said: 'Embrace research as an opportunity, not as an annoyance. Embrace it as a friend, not something to be afraid of.'

Kathrin Schmieder, PhD is a massage therapist in Hurstbridge, VIC, and a visiting research fellow at the Australian Research Consortium in Complementary and Integrative Medicine (ARCCIM), University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Contact: kathrin@unwind-recharge.com