

Entering the Field of Geriatric Massage

by Dawn Nelson, CMT

One of the questions I am asked most frequently by massage therapists in my training workshops is how one goes about getting “into” health care facilities to offer therapeutic massage as a professional service. When I started the COMPASSIONATE TOUCH outreach program in 1991, my oldest daughter was a supervisor in an extended care hospital, so I began there and expanded to other facilities. While it never hurts to have a relative in the business one is seeking to penetrate, it is not essential. What is essential is that you get the training you need to work with the population you want to serve, and then figure out the best way to market what you have to offer to that group of people, and to those caring for individuals within that group.

Getting Started

Massage therapists who want to adapt their skills to working with the elderly and the ill, and who are interested in offering massage to residents in health care facilities, should be professionally trained and carry their own liability insurance. In addition, they should acquire some knowledge and/or training in the field of geriatrics. The massage therapist must feel comfortable in a long-term care or assisted living

environment, and in the presence of those who reside in such facilities. He or she should be familiar with the physical and psychosocial characteristics of aging. The therapist should also be familiar with specific illnesses represented within the health care population. The massage therapist needs to understand how individuals are affected by Alzheimer’s disease, multiple sclerosis, stroke, diabetes, and other chronic conditions, as well as by life threatening illnesses such as AIDS and cancer.

The next step for the massage therapist might be to send a letter, brochure, and/or other appropriate information, along with a business card, to on-site administrators or managers of all the care facilities in a targeted area. It is a good idea to send copies of the same materials to each department supervisor, including the Director of Nursing, and to follow up the written material with a telephone call or personal visit.

It is essential to make a connection with someone in the health care facility who understands the benefits of massage for residents and to enlist his or her cooperation in integrating therapeutic massage into the residential program. That person will most likely be the Social Services Director, an Activity Coordinator, or the Director of Resident Services. Although titles may be

similar, the responsibilities and duties of those so named can vary. In my experience, no two facilities are run the same way. It is important to ascertain who makes the decisions in each facility, or at least which ones have persuasive access to the person in authority. Once you have developed a relationship with that person, he or she can help identify residents who wish to participate in a massage program, set up a schedule for sessions, obtain physician permission if necessary, and help develop systems for promoting and marketing the therapeutic massage service.

Promoting the Service

Including information about therapeutic massage in packets given to new residents and/or family members is a good way to introduce the availability of such a service. Writing an article for facility newsletters is another way to inform residents, family members and health care providers about therapeutic massage and its benefits. Massage therapy can be mentioned in monthly activity calendars and in listings of bedside activities or professional services available. Gift certificates for massage sessions can be suggested to family members, conservators and/or friends of residents for special occasions.

Making an introductory presentation or offering to do a mini-workshop on stress management and relaxation for a family support group is an opportunity to inform financially responsible family members about therapeutic massage. The massage therapist can answer questions about the service directly and can help family members decide whether massage sessions might be appropriate or helpful for their loved ones.

Once a massage therapy program is in place, it will continue to be promoted through word of mouth. As recipients tell other residents about the benefits they derive from their sessions, those residents may ask to be included in the program. As family members and staff members observe positive changes in residents who are receiving sessions, they will pass this information along to others.

Payment Strategies

Payment for massage sessions can be set up in a manner similar to beauty salon services which exist in virtually every care facility. Residents with private funds may pay for their sessions themselves at the time of service. Family members or family-appointed conservators may be billed by the massage therapist and send payment directly to him or her. A facility supervisor may be willing to collect payment for massage services from residents, family members, or conservators and then pay the massage therapist in a lump sum.

Residents on Medicaid may choose to pay for short massage sessions out of their monthly personal expenses allowance. In the case of non-alert residents, a supervisor may suggest to the responsible party or conservator that the service would be beneficial. If the facility carries a trust account for the resident, an on-site supervisor or business manager can make the decision.

In addition to contacting those in authority within health care facilities, a massage therapist can contact physicians, psychiatrists, home health companions, elder care managers, consultants and others who specialize in geriatric care to let them know of his or her service. Local agencies who serve the elderly, and other special interest groups may keep the information on file for referral purposes and/or

add it to listings of special services available.

Some massage therapists are willing to offer therapeutic massage sessions for an agreed upon period of time in a health care facility, in order to gain experience in working with the elderly and the ill and/or to elicit interest in the service. Once residents, staff and family members experience the benefits of therapeutic massage, creative solutions for payment may be found.

Some private insurance companies will pay for therapeutic massage if it is prescribed by a physician. Still another strategy would be to work with local non-profit agencies in applying for a grant to create a pilot program in a specific facility. Grant writing is a time-consuming and specific art, so you might want to hire the services of a professional grant writer to help get you started if you decide to pursue this avenue.

If what you do is beneficial to the residents, the staff and/or the facility, then your service will eventually begin to sell itself through word of mouth within the health care industry. If you conduct yourself in a professional manner and if you are creative, patient and persistent, eventually health care providers will be calling you to inquire about your services—and you may find yourself with more clients than you have time to see! ■



Dawn Nelson of Compassionate Touch with a client.