

# talk about touch

WITH MARY KATHLEEN ROSE AND MARY ANN FOSTER

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## ALTERNATIVE OR COMPLEMENTARY?



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MARY KATHLEEN ROSE: Shortly after having outpatient surgery, my cousin Sara, who lives in the Midwest, decided to get a relaxation massage at her family medical clinic. During the intake, the MT became obsessed with one detail of Sara's medical history and said, "I practice a type of bodywork that can cure this disease." Sara replied, "Oh really? Tell me more."

MARY ANN FOSTER: Sounds like the MT stepped out of her scope of practice.

MKR: As the therapist touted the curative benefits of her techniques, Sara interrupted and asked, "Do you know any doctors who support this idea?" To wit, the therapist said, "Oh no. Most of the doctors around here aren't open to anything alternative."

MAF: Let me get this straight: an MT gave a massage client medical advice about alternative cures and then dissed the medical doctors, to boot!

MKR: Yes. On one hand, she badmouthed curative medical practitioners, yet on the other hand, she was trying to be one.

MAF: This brings up a dilemma that I often see with MTs. We want to be accepted by the medical profession, yet we espouse conflicting practices, creating separation rather than acceptance. You work in a lot of medical settings, what's your take on this?

MKR: Where I have trained and supervised MTs, doctors have been incredibly supportive of therapeutic massage. I think this is so because we are very clear about our scope of practice. As MTs, we do not consider massage an alternative to medicine, but rather see it as complementary to the work of other health professionals.

MAF: The National Institutes of Health defines *alternative medicine* as a modality used *in place of* conventional medicine, whereas *complementary medicine* is defined as an approach that is *used together with* conventional medicine. Their examples of complementary medicine include, but are not limited to exercise, massage, meditation, music, nutrition, and relaxation.

MKR: These complementary therapies tend to have something in common. While they are valuable used along with conventional medicine, they also have innate value as stand-alone practices that nourish and support a quality of life.

MAF: This leads to a point I have always found confusing. Bodyworkers offer a health service that can improve overall wellness. In a similar vein, over the last couple of decades, the medical field has adopted a huge arena of wellness practices—such as exercise, nutrition, stress management—all of which could interface with massage incredibly well. Still, many MTs stay separate from the medical field by identifying as alternate therapists practicing treatment work, often putting themselves in direct competition with doctors and/or physical therapists. This seems to create walls instead of bridges.

MKR: Speaking of potential for creating bridges, one of the most exciting developments in the medical field is the recognition of palliative medicine as a specialty. *Palliative* is a familiar term used in the hospice movement referring to comforting rather than curative patient care. This new movement expands the term palliative beyond the hospice context to address the broader needs of people for comfort care measures. Because of the potential growth in this area, the massage profession should take note. It provides a context in which appropriate massage (i.e. palliative massage) can interface


easily with a medical team committed to serving a patient's unique needs.


MAF: Everyone deals with stress and illness at some point in their lives and could use a comforting palliative massage.

MKR: Another example of a medical paradigm that incorporates healing touch as a complementary therapy is the Planetree medical philosophy. The Planetree organization assists hospitals and health centers to implement patient-centered care by creating healing environments and promoting a full range of complementary therapies.

MAF: Indeed! Right here in our town is a Planetree affiliate, the Longmont United Hospital. An essential part of its patient care program includes therapeutic massage and it employs a full team of massage and bodywork practitioners.

MKR: Yes, good things are happening in the massage field. As we shift our identity from *alternative* practitioners to *complementary* practitioners, we will continue to discover new opportunities for working in the broader world of conventional medicine. **m&b**

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