



Standards of Practice Massage Therapy in Quebec

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Introduction

Scope of Practice

The practice of Massage Therapy consists of assessing the soft tissue and joints with safe manoeuvres that maintain or augment physical function, and/or relieve stress and pain.

What are Standards of Practice?

The “*Association québécoise des thérapeutes naturels*” (AQTN) publishes Standards of Practice as a source of reference for our therapists, for schools and for the public, so as to establish reasonable expectations from a massage therapy session. Due to the varying levels of training in Quebec, it is important to have a Standard that everyone can follow.

Standards help guide a practice and may also increase public protection. It is the obligation of the registered massage therapist to ensure they are complying with the Standards.

AQTN expects that its Standards of Practice will evolve as changes in practice occur, notably as Quebec schools increase their training requirements away from the traditional 400 hour level.

There is no relevant legislation in Quebec, as the province is not provincially regulated.

Definitions

Therapeutic Relationship: A client-therapist relationship is designed to promote, support and advance the health and best interest of the client. It must be grounded in trust, respect and the appropriate use of knowledge and skill.

Boundaries: We each have boundaries that define our personal space. Physical boundaries determine responses to close physical presence and to touch. Individuals also have boundaries defining their psychological and emotional space. We each interpret questions or remarks as appropriate / inappropriate, unobtrusive / intrusive or comforting / discomforting. Personal boundaries can vary widely among individuals according to such things as life experience, gender, age, culture and personal preference.

Professional Boundaries are defined by the professional role and the limits of the professional role. A **boundary violation** is a serious boundary crossing and abuse of power which places the client at risk of psychological, financial, physical and/or sexual harm.

Power: The therapist and client do not have equal power in the relationship. The client seeks the assistance of the MT who is considered to have knowledge and skill that the client does not have. The MT may have confidential client information that he/she must use in the client's best interest.

Abuse: Abuse is a violation of the power in the client-therapist relationship. It violates the basic requirements of a therapeutic relationship: trust and respect. The MT must use the appropriate knowledge and level of power to prevent abuse. Abuse serves the MT's interest or personal needs, often at the expense of the needs of the client. The MT who abuses a client acts outside of professional boundaries. Abuse may take the form of **verbal, emotional, physical, financial and/or sexual**.

Verbal Abuse: language that demeans, humiliates or insults the client. Verbal abuse can cause **emotional abuse** since the language may harm the client emotionally, culturally or spiritually. Given that MTs work with clients of many cultures and beliefs, it is important to recognize that personal remarks about client's appearance, behaviour, language, beliefs, religious practices, etc., may be distressing. Behaviours such as sarcasm, teasing, swearing, or threatening are examples of behaviours that may be considered verbal or emotional abuse.

Physical Abuse: an act which may cause pain, or harm to another. Slapping, hitting, pushing, and use of force during a treatment are examples of behaviours which can be viewed as physical abuse.

Financial Abuse: Financial abuse exploits the power differential between the MT and client and is often a monetary or equivalent gain for the MT. Examples of financial abuse can include accepting gifts, borrowing money, becoming a trustee of a client's account, accessing a client bank account, seeking financial benefits or other services.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual abuse is a boundary violation and abuse of power. Sexual abuse is regulated by the Quebec criminal code. Sexual abuse is defined very broadly as any undesired touching perceived as a sexual nature.

Standard for Maintaining Professional Boundaries and reinventing Sexual Abuse

Registered Massage Therapists (“RMTs”, “MTs”) work with clients for relaxation and/or therapeutic purposes. The AQTN requires that therapists maintain professional boundaries at all times, as outlined in the code of ethics. Understanding the importance of boundaries and respecting boundaries is critical to the prevention of abuse and sexual abuse in particular.

The AQTN Standard is divided into two parts:

- 1) “*Maintaining Professional Boundaries*” and
- 2) “*Preventing Sexual Abuse*”.

1. Maintaining Professional Boundaries

MTs work with clients in a process that includes various phases.

Throughout these steps, the MT is to maintain a strictly therapeutic relationship, and is also to respect professional boundaries. The MT works with the client to meet realistic client needs and goals.

Establishing a Practice Setting that Maintains Professional Boundaries

When working in a public or mobile space, the therapist must take reasonable steps to ensure professionalism in the practice setting.

Elements that the AQTN deems important:

- Cleanliness be observed at all times.
- Adequate lighting to ensure client safety.
- Free from potential hazards for injury.
- Respects individual needs related to allergies and sensitivities.
- Provides for client privacy and confidentiality.

- Ensures that any visual media or messaging accessible to clients or members of the public is appropriate and is not of a sensitive, discriminatory or offensive nature.

Interpersonal Behaviours and Non-Verbal Communication

Interpersonal behaviour and non-verbal communication are significant to setting professional boundaries within the Therapeutic Relationship. The MT must maintain professional behaviour toward clients at all times. The MT must also refrain from behaviours, remarks or physical gestures that increase the risk of boundary violations.

MTs must ensure professional behaviour, body language and gestures by:

- Wearing attire appropriate to health care professionals and the context of the work environment.
- Engaging in appropriate personal hygiene practices.
- Providing adequate physical boundary space between the therapist and client at all stages of the client appointment.
- Physical touch or contact only in the context of assessment and treatment processes for which the client has given informed consent.
- Identify and recognize any client 'non-verbal' communication cues and address respectfully. Examples of "non-verbal" cues are: pained facial expressions, tensed body, laboured breathing.

If a client initiates a hug, the MT must consider the intent (e.g. appreciation or sexual) prior to engaging. Hugging is not to be initiated by the MT.

Standard: Verbal Communication to Maintain Professional Boundaries

An important part of any therapeutic relationship is communication. Communication must be respectful, professional, and appropriate to a health care environment.

In communicating to maintain professional boundaries, MTs must:

- Use language that is respectful, courteous, and non-sexual in nature.
- Respect client culture and diversity.
- Restrict inquiry to content relevant to assessment and treatment, and focus personal disclosure of information on that which furthers the therapeutic relationship. Set and maintain appropriate boundaries in conversation at all

times. The MT is responsible for helping clients recognize when a request or MT disclosure is outside of the therapist-client relationship and the Massage Therapy Treatment Plan.

Draping

One of the ways MTs establish and maintain physical boundaries in the therapeutic relationship is through appropriate and secure draping measures or techniques.

When appropriately applied and monitored throughout treatment, draping can ensure the client's sense of physical privacy and safety, and builds the respect and trust inherent in the therapeutic relationship.

When inappropriately or inadvertently applied, poor draping can result in boundary violations and instances of physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

MT must ensure to apply these draping techniques:

- Ensure they have properly informed the client of the draping requirements associated with assessment prior to beginning a treatment.
- Confirm client comfort when treatment is performed over clothing.
- Provide opportunities for clients to ask questions.
- Apply necessary draping measures securely to engage in setting clear physical boundaries that separate the areas of treatment and the areas where no touch will be applied throughout the treatment.
- Verify client safety, sense of security and comfort level with draping / positioning measures.
- Ensure that only the area of the client's body that is actively receiving treatment is uncovered, with the exception of the face and head or as may be reasonable.
- At the request of the client, expose areas of the body that are not considered sensitive areas when not receiving treatment for the purposes of temperature regulation or client preference (e.g. arms, feet or back).
- Ensure that the MT does not reach underneath the draping.

Gifts – giving or receiving

The MT maintains boundaries by recognizing that receiving or giving gifts can violate boundaries. Gifts from clients may be offered, even unintentionally, as a means to secure 'special' or preferred treatment.

- All gifts of a significant value (either monetarily or sentimentally) given / received should be documented in the client record. The RMT must use their professional judgement to determine if the gift is of significant value to the client.
- The MT must not allow gift giving / receiving to influence their professional decision-making nor allow it to impact the frequency, duration, cost, or modality used for/with the client.

2. Preventing Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse of clients by non-regulated health professionals is prohibited under *Quebec criminal law*.

All massage therapists are required under this law to avoid sexual abuse of clients.

Sexual abuse is often preceded by growing boundary crossings and violations. This slippery slope can be avoided by a clear understanding of boundaries and the limits of the professional relationship.

Defining Sexual Abuse a client by a MT means:

1. *Any form of physical sexual relations between the therapist and the client,*
2. *touching, of a sexual nature, of the client by the therapist, or*
3. *behaviour or remarks of a sexual nature by the therapist towards the client.*

Standard: Treatment of Sensitive Areas of the Body

RMTs will at times be asked to provide treatment to areas that may be considered sensitive areas of the body, i.e., chest wall musculature; upper inner thigh; and gluteal region. Massage, or indeed touching in any way, of these areas poses a potential risk for misinterpretation, misunderstanding and may be experienced by the client as a violation of their body - and possibly as sexual abuse.

As the treatment of these sensitive areas is considered a high-risk activity for the therapist, the AQTN proposes guidance to direct Massage Therapy practice in an ethical, appropriate and safe manner. This Standard requires that:

1. *Draping of the client's sensitive areas must be discussed prior to treatment and proper draping is used;*
2. *Treatment of sensitive areas must be discussed with the client in advance; it may be appropriate to get a written informed consent.*

Under no circumstances is touching of the genital or anal regions (applicable to all genders) justified as within the domain of Massage Therapy. Touching these areas is considered sexual abuse. This applies to the MT and the client.

At all times, the RMT should be aware that individual's experiences, gender, age, culture, a history of sexual abuse and other factors may influence anxieties concerning touching of the body. Differences in the limits and meaning of touch vary considerably among individuals and cultures. The MT should be sensitive to this issue in all areas of their practice.

Indications for chest wall:

- Lymphatic drainage issues including congestion, swelling or edema, and should only be applied if the massage therapist has the appropriate training.

Specific to chest wall:

- Reduced range of motion in the chest, neck or shoulder areas.
- Impaired muscle performance and function.
- The presence of congestion, swelling or edema associated with soft tissue injury.
- The presence of pain or tenderness of a benign origin.
- The presence of soft tissue integrity issues in the region including trigger points, tendinopathies, and sprain or strain injuries.
- Impaired postural control and function.
- Impaired function of the muscles associated with respiratory function.

Indications for Gluteal Region:

- Soft tissue impairments in the gluteal and posterior hip regions that have been identified as significant and relevant to the achievement of treatment plan objectives.
- Reduced range of motion in the trunk, spine, pelvis or lower extremities.
- Impaired muscle performance and function.
- The presence of congestion, swelling or edema associated with soft tissue injury.

- The presence of pain or tenderness of a benign origin.
- Scar therapy management.
- The presence of soft tissue integrity issues in the region including trigger points, tendinopathies, sprain or strain injuries.
- Impaired postural control and function.

Indications for Upper Inner Thigh and Anterior Pelvic / Groin Areas:

- To reduce or eliminate soft tissue impairments in the upper inner thigh and anterior pelvic / groin areas that have been identified as significant and relevant to the achievement of treatment plan goals.
- Reduced range of motion in the trunk, spine or lower extremities.
- Impaired muscle performance and function.
- The presence of congestion, swelling or edema associated with soft tissue injury.
- The presence of pain or tenderness of a benign origin.
- The presence of soft tissue integrity issues in the region including trigger points, tendinopathies, and sprain or strain injuries.
- Impaired postural control and function.

Draping of the Client's Sensitive Areas Is Discussed Prior to Treatment and Proper Draping is used

The MT must ensure that all Standards of Practice are followed pertaining to the draping of a sensitive area for the purposes of assessment or treatment.

To ensure proper draping of sensitive areas, MTs must:

- Provide secure draping technique options, including the option to work through clothing or sheet barrier (where possible) to the client in order to facilitate the utmost sense of comfort and safety.

- Describe the drape process to the client prior to and throughout treatment, as appropriate.
- Verify client comfort and consent throughout the entire process, as appropriate.
- Make adjustments according to client needs when required.
- Apply clearly identifiable and secure draping of the sensitive area so that the client can properly distinguish areas where touch will be applied and where it will not.
- Ensure that drape boundaries properly protect the client from exposure of the genital area and the gluteal cleft without exception.
- Provide for the sensitive area to remain covered and securely draped at all times other than what is necessary for direct assessment or treatment application.
- Ensure that when bilateral exposure is required (for some treatment techniques), the RMT must discuss with the client prior to obtaining informed consent.
- Never reach underneath the draping.

Post-Termination Relationships

Ending the client-therapist relationship does not eliminate the power imbalance that exists between therapist and client. This is because there may be continuing trust, knowledge, or influence derived from the previous professional relationship.

Standards

Standard 1: Prepare the Treatment Area

Conditions: Ensure that the treatment area and massage equipment are cleaned and disinfected between each client. As well, all linens, towels and blankets should be washed and cleaned between each client. MT should ensure that proper materials and products are used in the cleaning process.

Task: Prepare the treatment area

Quality / Technical:

- Ensure that the room and equipment surfaces have been cleaned.
- Only sheets and towels that have been freshly laundered

- So that linen used for draping will allow for full coverage of the client.

Safety:

- Ensure that linens and pillows do not interfere with the client's ability to get on and off the table.
- Ensure that any obstacle or substance that could make the floor slippery is removed from the treatment room to prevent accidental falls.
- Ensure that equipment is properly maintained and that manufacturer's instructions are followed correctly.
- Ensure that the transference of infectious diseases is limited.

Timing:

- Ensure all these steps are followed prior to the client entering the treatment area and after the client leaves the treatment area.

Standard 2: Inform client of pricing

Ensure that the client understands and agrees to the costs.

Conditions: A client seeking a treatment for massage therapy.

Task: Ensure client has the information pertaining to fees including whether or not tax and/or gratuities are included.

Quality / Technical:

- Service fees should be posted and visible in waiting area or treatment room if the same.
- Ensure that you explain the rates for a massage therapy appointment.
- Ensure that you explain your cancellation policy for a massage therapy cancelled appointment. It's preferable to do this in writing wherever possible.
- Provide the client with an opportunity to ask questions.

Timing:

- Ensure these steps are followed when client arrives or makes contact to book initial treatment.

Standard 3: Wash Hands and Skin Surface

Conditions: Ensure that the treatment area and the client are ready for treatment as per steps above.

Task: Wash your hands and any skin surface that will/has come in contact with the client.

Quality / Technical:

- Ensure that soap and water or alcohol based hand sanitizer is used to clean skin surfaces by washing for a minimum of 10 seconds, including all surfaces. Hand washing guidelines are provided to all therapists in AQTN's welcoming kit.

Timing:

- These steps should be followed immediately before and immediately after each client treatment.

Standard 4: Interview the Client to Obtain His / Her Objectives

Where: In a treatment area, given a client who comes to you for massage therapy.

Task: Interview the client to obtain his/ her treatment goals.

Quality / Technical:

- Ensure that your interview questions include:
 - client's goals for the treatment.
 - limitations to activities of daily life (ADL).
 - identification of area(s) client would like to focus on discovery of contributing factors.

Quality /Interpersonal:

- Ensure that you give the client an opportunity to inform you of any specific area(s) to be treated and to relay any information the client chooses about his/her treatment goals.
- Ensure that you give the client an opportunity to ask questions.

Timing:

- These steps are to be followed: before the massage begins and at any time during the massage.

Standard 5: Health intake form

The Health intake form should be given to the client in the waiting room or treatment area. It should be discussed privately in the treatment area.

Task: Obtain/update and record the client's health intake form.

Quality / Technical:

Health intake form information must be requested from the client to identify indications and / or contraindications to treatment. Information requested must include, at the minimum, the items included in the health intake form available to AQTN members in the administrative menu.

Quality / Interpersonal:

- Ensure that you inform the client of the need to inform you of any change in his/her health status.
- Ensure that you inform the client of the reason why an accurate health history is needed before massage begins.
- Ensure that you provide the client with an opportunity to ask questions to better understand health history questions being asked.
- Ensure that you inform the client that all client information is confidential within the limits identified in the Code of Ethics.
- Ensure that any infectious disease are recognized and that any routine and additional precautions are taken, in accordance with the training and experience of the therapist.
- These steps are to be followed before initial treatment begins or if the client's health/situation changes, or once a year at minimum.
- After a client absence of one year from the last treatment.
- Every year, at a minimum.

Safety:

- Ensure that you inquire as to any allergies and / or sensitivity to hydrotherapy additives and lubricants that the client may have.
- Ensure that any contraindications for massage therapy or massage therapy technique(s) are recognized.

Standard 6: Consent

It is important to obtain the client's consent prior to beginning the treatment.

- Ensure that the treatment is consistent with the massage therapy Scope of Practice and AQTN code of ethics.
- Ensure that consent is obtained voluntarily.
- Ensure that consent is not obtained through misrepresentation or fraud.
- Ensure that the client is told the nature and purpose of the treatment including the areas of the body involved.
- Ensure that the client is informed of any risks, benefits, possible complications and any contraindications of the treatment.
- Ensure that the client is informed that treatment will be stopped or modified at any time, at his / her request.
- Ensure that you tell the client that you will be checking periodically to determine the client's level of comfort.
- Ensure that the client is given an opportunity to ask any questions.

Steps normally to be performed before beginning the treatment.

- So that you record informed consent in the client's intake form as soon as possible, within 24 hours of treatment.

Special Considerations

Determine the Client's Condition

- Ensure that you refer the client to another health care professional for conditions that you cannot assess or if the need for a referral is indicated in the assessment or re-assessment, for example:

severe unremitting pain or severe pain with no history of injury.

Determine if Massage Therapy Treatment is Indicated

Taking into consideration the client's completed health intake form and your assessment of the client's condition, determine if Massage Therapy is indicated.

- Ensure that if there is a contraindication to a massage, you refer the client to another qualified health care professional or that you modify the treatment so that the client is not put at risk.
- Ensure that any referral made is well documented in the client's health intake form.

Treatment, Treatment Plans and On-Going Treatment Plans

Explain the Initial Treatment to the Client

If it is determined that a massage therapy treatment is indicated and the MT has the required training to work with the client, the MT must explain the initial treatment to the client.

- Ensure that the treatment is consistent with the massage therapy scope of practice, AQTN code of ethics and provincial limitations related to reserved acts.
- The plan must include: goals, type and focus of treatment(s), areas of the body to be treated, anticipated frequency and duration of treatments, anticipated client responses to treatment, schedule for reassessment of the client's condition, and / or recommended remedial exercises and / or hydrotherapy.
- Ensure that the client is given an opportunity to ask any questions.
- These steps should be followed before beginning the treatment, and updated whenever treatment plan is modified.

Pre / Post Treatment Protocol

Once the client has given consent to proceed with treatment instruct the client on undressing / dressing procedures.

- Ensure that you explain to the client the reasons for the removal of clothing.
- Ensure that you instruct the client to remove the clothing and items which he / she is comfortable removing.
- Ensure that you provide the client with an opportunity to ask questions.
- Ensure that you provide the client an opportunity to dress / undress out of the view of the therapist and other people.
- Ensure that you get permission from the client to re-enter the treatment area.
- If the client requires assistance to dress / undress themselves the following procedures are followed:
 - Ensure that you inform the client of those pieces of clothing you will need to remove.
 - Ensure that you remove only those pieces of clothing the client wants to remove.
 - Ensure that you inform the client of where you might touch him / her and why.
 - Ensure that you touch only those areas of the client's body needed to remove the client's clothing.
 - Ensure that you record the client's consent and the assistance provided.
 - Ensure that all efforts are made to maintain respectful privacy of the client by use of covering, while assisting him/her to dress/undress.
- Ensure that the instructions include how the client should position his /her body for treatment.
- Ensure that the client is advised as to use of the sheets to cover him / herself once he / she is in position for treatment, if he/she is undressed.
- If the client requires assistance on or off the massage table:
 - Ensure that you modify the assistance approach so as to minimize the client's physical discomfort.
 - Ensure that all efforts are made to maintain respectful privacy of the client by use of covering, while assisting him/her in getting on or off the table.
- Ensure that the instructions include any precautions the client should take to prevent falling off the table.
- Ensure that you prevent the client from falling.
- These steps should be taken before the client undresses.

Once the session is completed, instruct the client how to get off the table.

- Ask the client if he/she needs assistance.

- Ensure that you tell the client about the possibility of dizziness and light-headedness as a result of getting off the table too quickly.

These steps should be followed once the session is finished and before the MT leaves the room.

Determine if oil/gel is needed and determine which to use

Using the client's health history, allergies and preference, determine if the use of oil or gel is indicated.

- Ensure that you use contaminant-free lubricant.

Recommendations

After the massage treatment has been completed and the client is dressed, offer recommendations to the client how they can self care.

- Ensure that you explain to the client appropriate self-care including its intended effect and possible negative reactions.
- Ensure that you demonstrate the recommended exercise(s).
- Ensure that you witness that the client understands the self-care and/or exercise correctly.
- Ensure that the self-care and / or exercise does not put the client at risk.

These steps to be performed before the client departs and only when the massage therapist has the appropriate training for making recommendations.

Client Health Intake Form

Update Client Intake For Each Client as appropriate, if the client's situation changes (i.e. had an injury, surgery, started another treatment such as physiotherapy or other).

- Records must include:
 - the completed client health history through the intake form is obtained.
 - record of client's consent to treatment.
 - records of on-going treatment, if applicable.
- Ensure that records are confidential and are stored so as not to be accessible to unauthorized individuals.
- Ensure that records are kept for a minimum of one year from the client's last visit.
- If the client was under 18 years old at the time of his/her last visit, the records are kept for one year after the day he/she turned 18.

Issuing an insurance receipt to the client

Once the massage session is finished, complete and provide an insurance receipt for the client if requested.

- Ensure that your receipt include:
date, duration of massage, cost, client name, your name, your permit number, a contact phone number and your signature.

These steps are to be followed:

- as soon as treatment ends.
- as possible after a treatment, ideally within 24 hours.

Incorporating Aromatherapy

Based on the client's emotional and physical condition at the time the massage treatment is to be given, the massage therapist must use their judgment and experience in determining if incorporating aromatherapy into the session is in the best interest of the client.

The massage therapist must have appropriate training in aromatherapy, and if he / she determines that aromatherapy may be beneficial, he /she may include the use of aromatherapy in the session. What must be taken into consideration prior to incorporating aromatherapy, is all the information on the client intake form, such as allergies, counter-indications and personal preferences.

The therapist must inform the client of the use and extent of aromatherapy in the session.

- So that the treatment conforms to the scope of practice of massage therapy: aromatherapy may only represent a small portion of the duration of the massage - or be used to complement most or the entire massage.
- Aromatherapy may only be used aromatically or topically.
- Ensure that the client has the opportunity to ask questions and that the client consents to the use of aromatherapy in the massage.
- Aromatherapy should not be used for the main purpose of up-selling essential oils or other products, but rather for the health benefit of the client.

These steps should be performed:

- Before commencing the treatment.

Incorporating Reiki into a massage treatment

Based on the client's emotional, spiritual and physical condition at the time the massage treatment is to be rendered, the massage therapist may use their judgement and experience in determining if incorporating Reiki into the session is in the best interest of the client.

Given that the massage therapist has formally undergone the Reiki training process, and that he / she determines that Reiki may be beneficial and is appropriate to the client's views and beliefs, he /she may include the use of Reiki.

The therapist ought to explain and obtain consent from the client if the use of Reiki is sought.

- So that the treatment conforms to the scope of practice of massage therapy, Reiki may only represent a partial focus of the duration of the massage, less than one third.
- Reiki use should be employed with a genuine view towards healing, with positive energy
- Ensure there's time and space in the session so that the client can understand and consent to the inclusion of Reiki, ask any questions pertaining to the practice and expand on any situation leading to the seeking out of Reiki.

These steps should be performed:

- Before commencing the treatment.

Cupping

Based on the client's condition, and if the MT is properly trained, the massage therapist may use their judgement to include cupping during the session. If the MT determines cupping is beneficial, the MT must explain to the client the procedure in detail as well as the reasons why cupping will be performed.

Explain the use, the benefits and the counter-indications as well as the functioning of the cupping to the client, to then professionally provide the treatment as therapeutically appropriate.

- So that the treatment conforms to the scope of practice of massage therapy, cupping can only represent a short duration of the massage (less than half).
- The plan should include the objectives, the areas of the body to treat, the frequency and the duration of the application of the cupping (which vary based on the reaction and condition of the client) as well as the anticipated client reactions, accompanied with post treatment recommendations to optimise results.
- Ensure that the client has the opportunity to ask questions and that the client accepts the treatment plan.

These steps should be performed:

- Before commencing the treatment.