



## **Bulletin Number 1**

# **An Overview of Client Abuse Prevention**

REVISED MARCH 2005

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*As a requirement of the Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991 (the RHPA), each regulatory health College must have a Patient/Client Relations Program that includes measures for preventing and dealing with sexual abuse of patients or clients.*

*This bulletin provides an overview of the abuse prevention program put into place by the College of Massage Therapists of Ontario, and describes College initiatives and available resources that offer guidance and support in understanding your professional responsibilities in this important area.*

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## **Defining Abuse**

The College regards any act of abuse or harassment of a client, staff person and/or colleague as unacceptable. Accordingly, the College recently expanded its definition of abuse to include all forms of abuse, including sexual abuse. It has also strengthened its position on zero tolerance by moving from a zero tolerance “philosophy” to a developing and adopting a formal Zero Tolerance Policy (November 2003), based on the expanded definition of abuse.

In defining abuse, it is important for the professional to recognize the imbalance of power that exists in the client/professional relationship. Clients often seek professional services when they are vulnerable or in a state of pain. A member of the profession has ‘power’ by virtue of their authority, knowledge, access to privileged information and the influence they potentially hold over the client. Professionals are expected to address the client’s needs in a sensitive and caring manner in accordance with the Standards of Practice and the Code of Ethics for the profession.

Abuse can be defined as:

### *Verbal*

Making rude, sarcastic, demeaning or seductive remarks. It is important to note that the tone of verbal communications will also characterize how words are perceived. Members of the profession must be aware that age, culture, socio-economic status and particular sensitivities affect how a client may perceive communications with a member.

### *Physical*

Using unnecessary force in the course of providing treatment.

### *Emotional*

Using the position of power to intimidate or show insensitivity toward the client. Emotional abuse demeans clients in such a way as to lower their sense of personal worth.

### *Financial*

Inappropriately using a client's funds, property or resources. May include such behaviours as:

- Attempting to, or actually persuading, tricking, or threatening the client to part with their funds, property or possessions;
- Recommending excessive treatments with no clinical indication requiring the same; and
- Using a client's money for purposes other than that intended by the client.

### *Sexual*

The *RHPA* defines sexual abuse to include:

- (a) Sexual intercourse or other forms of physical sexual relations between the member and the patient,
- (b) Touching of a sexual nature, of the patient by a member, or
- (c) Behaviour or remarks of a sexual nature by the member towards the patient

#### **Exception:**

"Sexual nature" does not include touching, behaviour or remarks of a clinical nature appropriate to the service provided.

## **The Role of the College in Preventing Abuse**

The College recognizes the seriousness and extent of injury that abuse causes the abused client and others related to them and therefore supports zero tolerance of any form of client abuse by massage therapists. The College accepts responsibility for protecting the public interest by:

- Addressing the issue openly;
- Striving to provide an accessible and sensitive reporting process; and
- Establishing deterrents through the administration of a discipline process reflecting the serious nature of the violation.

The College is committed to prevention through education of its members, clients of massage therapy and the public.

It is the policy of the College to investigate and act upon any complaints and information received dealing with allegations of any form of client abuse in an effective, timely and sensitive manner. For those members found guilty of other forms of

client abuse, the College is committed to imposing appropriate penalties to reflect the severity of the conduct of concern. In relation to those members found guilty of sexual abuse of a client, the College will uphold the sanctions mandated by the *RHPA*. (Please refer to the complete written Policy for more information.)

## Client Abuse Prevention Plan

### *Description*

The College's Client Relations Committee has developed a Client Abuse Prevention Plan as a component of its Client Relations Program. The plan provides guidance and information to members of the profession, as well as the public, in regards to professional ethical issues, with a view to enhancing the therapist-client relationship and ensuring safe and ethical care.

The plan goes beyond the statutory requirement under the *RHPA* for measures that deal with the prevention of sexual abuse and addresses prevention of all areas of client abuse.

### *Objectives*

The objectives of the Client Abuse Prevention Plan are:

- To ensure accountability of the profession to the public on issues related to sexual and other forms of abuse;
- To educate and provide guidance and direction to the members on ways to prevent client abuse;
- To educate clients of massage therapy about their rights and responsibilities as a client, what to expect from their therapist and what constitutes appropriate conduct from the profession; and

- To ensure access to information by the general public about the College so that the public may know to whom the therapist is accountable and where one can make inquiries or present concerns about an individual massage therapist.

### *Goal*

The College's ultimate goal is to reduce the number of client abuse cases. As well, the plan provides for greater professional and public awareness around professional and ethical issues related to abuse.

## Prevention Initiatives and Resources

The College has developed the following abuse prevention materials and initiatives, in four key areas:

### *Education for Massage Therapists*

#### **"MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS AND MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES IN PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS" WORKSHOPS**

Understanding professional boundaries is the foundation for preventing client abuse. Since 1997, the College has offered this two-day professional workshop six times per year, free of charge, in regions across Ontario.

#### **WHERE'S MY LINE?**

This booklet, co-produced by the College of Chiropractors of Ontario, the College of Massage Therapists of Ontario and the College of Physiotherapists of Ontario, provides information for health care professionals about defining and respecting personal boundaries in health care relationships.

## *Guidelines for Massage Therapists*

### ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY

The College issued this policy on November 2003, reflecting the College's expanded definition of abuse.

### BULLETINS – INFORMATION AND GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR REGARDING PREVENTION OF ABUSE OF MASSAGE THERAPY CLIENTS

The College originally issued two bulletins under this title in November 1995 and September 1996. The content of these bulletins has been updated and revised, and three new bulletins (including this one) were issued in March 2005:

- **Bulletin 1** – An Overview of Client Abuse Prevention
- **Bulletin 2** – Preventing Sexual Abuse
- **Bulletin 3** – An Introduction to Diversity

### *Education for Clients of Massage Therapy*

#### UNDERSTANDING RESPONSES TO TOUCH

This brochure is designed to be used as a tool by members when communicating with clients. It explains the normal physical and emotional responses that some clients may experience when they receive a massage therapy treatment. (Originally issued in 1997 as "Understanding Various Responses; revised in 2002.)

#### IF YOU'RE CONCERNED (ABOUT ABUSE)

This brochure was developed to provide information to clients concerning the definition of abuse, how to identify inappropriate behaviour and understanding their rights. (It replaces "Zero Tolerance and You" first published in 1996.)

### THE COMPLAINTS PROCESS

This brochure describes the College's complaints process, step-by-step.

### *Information for the Public*

#### ABOUT MASSAGE THERAPY

This brochure provides information regarding massage therapy, how members are trained, what a client can expect, the role of the College and how to locate a massage therapist and verify credentials. (Originally issued in 1997 as "Massage Therapy in Ontario"; revised in 2002.)

#### PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

Following a comprehensive public and client opinion survey in Ontario in 2000, the College launched an ongoing public education program which includes media release distribution, radio and television advertising and radio shows. The public is also encouraged to seek information from the College website.

To learn more about these initiatives, or to access copies of materials, please visit the College website or contact the College by phone.



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